

The “Tractorist”

PORTRAIT OF A TRUE SOLDIER IN THE REBBE'S ARMY

Fifty five years ago, a young man sporting a tee-shirt and a pair of khaki shorts showed up to the large ‘zal’ of the Lubavitch Yeshiva in Lod and asked to be accepted into the yeshiva. A few months later he had already made his first trip to 770 where he merited unique and special attention from the Rebbe, including the privilege of being allowed to enter the Rebbe’s room when he wished. A short while later, the Rebbe charged him with a special shlichus: to work as a “tractorist” in Chaifa.

Thus, began a most unique and fruitful shlichus, through which the shliach-tractorist inspired thousands of individuals and families of baalei teshuva, long before anyone had ever heard of the ‘baal teshuva movement’.

Reb Reuven Dunin was born on Yud Zayin Teves, 5694, in Eretz Yisroel. His father descended from a family of Chassidim but was himself a misnaged.

Reuven grew up in an era infused with the spirit of rebuilding the land and at quite a young age, being swept up in the wave patriotic fervor and idealism, he left his parents home to make his contribution. Over the years his commitment to Yiddishkeit gradually weakened until finally he left it completely. For nearly ten years he worked with heavy machinery, driving a tractor, and made a good living.

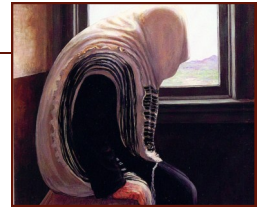
But at twenty-three, he began to feel emptiness in his routine. His inspiration had dried up and his idealistic fervor had faded. He felt that he was missing something; that somewhere out there, there existed another way of living that was more fulfilling.

One time, while Reuven was visiting his parents, his

younger brother announced that he had left the Ponevezh Yeshiva to begin learning in Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim in Kfar Chabad. He gave Reuven a page of Chassidus and urged him to read it. Taking the paper and beginning to read, Reuven soon found himself engrossed in the words. Although he had never heard of “Ein Sof” and “Yesh Meayin” before and didn’t quite understand them, he nevertheless felt that these words spoke the truth.

Still, he was not entirely convinced. He returned to his work and continued on as usual but something inside had changed. With time he worked up enough courage and curiosity to investigate the Yeshiva world, but the first few Yeshivas that he went to, left him feeling disillusioned. Finally, he decided to try out the Chabad Yeshiva in Lod.

Sporting a pair of khaki shorts, he arrived at the Ye-



REB REUVEN DUNIN, KNOWN SIMPLY AS “THE TRACTORIST”.
5694-5762.

shiva and asked to see the director. The mashpia, Reb Shlomo Chaim Kesselman, stared at him hesitantly but after Reuven insisted that he would dedicate himself to do everything the mashpia would say, he accepted him.

He threw himself into his learning with incredible energy, as if to make up for everything he had missed out on in the last ten years, making great progress. Within a short time, he was considered a proper Tomim

in every sense of the word.

IN 770

A few months later, Reb Reuven decided that it was time to travel to New York and see the Rebbe. He would later relate, “I felt that the momentum I had when I first arrived was fading and because I had heard so much about the Rebbe – the Rebbe’s sichos, the Rebbe’s horaos etc. – I figured that going to the Rebbe would reinvigor-



REB REUVEN, SEATED FOURTH FROM LEFT, FARBREING IN HIS YOUNGER YEARS. CREDITS: LUBAVITCH ARCHIVES.

SPORTING A PAIR OF KHAKE SHORTS, HE ARRIVED AT THE YESHIVA AND ASKED TO SEE THE DIRECTOR



ate my inspiration.”

In those days, travelling to the Rebbe was fraught with various difficulties: the Israeli government didn’t usually allow army reservists – especially bochurim – to leave the country, in fear that they wouldn’t return. And aside

from that, the tickets were quite steep. So, Reb Reuven returned to his tractor until he saved up enough money to afford a ticket, and eventually obtained consent from the government to travel. The bochurim in the Yeshiva accompanied him to the airport where they sang and danced until he boarded the plane; they made such a *shturem* that an official had to beg them to stop!

When he arrived in New York on Friday, a relative was waiting to take him to Williamsburg for Shabbos but Reb Reuven insisted on seeing the Rebbe that same day and so they drove to 770. When he entered 770 for the first time, he was surprised to see that no one was there, and certainly not the Rebbe. Someone finally entered and when he asked to see the Rebbe, he was told to return for Shacharis on Shabbos.

The next morning he walked from Williamsburg to 770 and saw the Rebbe by Shacharis for the first time.

Later he described the experience:

“It took place upstairs in what was then known as the ‘big zal’. There was enough room for everyone and there was no need for pushing. I stood amongst the crowd and watched the Rebbe’s every move. I still remember the first impression the Rebbe made on me. He sat like a king, alone by the table, and wrapped in his tallis. His demeanor was one of such nobility and sanctity that I was not able to look away from him the entire davening, and a few times his eyes actually met mine. I later felt that this behavior was inappropriate, because in a yechidus that I merited much later, the Rebbe used the concept of machshavos zaros during davening as an analogy for what we were discussing. The Rebbe smiled as he said this to me and I felt that he was referring to those moments when I stood like a ‘golem’ and stared at him during davening.”

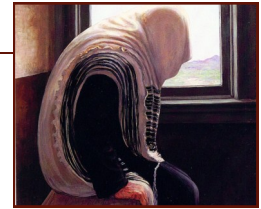
After his first Shabbos in 770, he received a room in the dormitory and became part of the yeshiva. Invigorated, he threw himself into learning and could always be found in zal with his seforim.

FIRST YECHIDUS

After a month had passed, he entered into his first yechidus.

He later recounted:

“The Rebbe asked me if I knew anything about heavy machinery and, in my foolishness, I panicked. Reb Shlomo Chaim had once explained to me that what one mer-



its hearing in his first yechidus plays a significant role throughout his entire life and so I was alarmed at the thought that I would spend the rest of my life as an engineer or on a tractor!

"I don't remember if I answered but suddenly the Rebbe asked me why I had entered into yechidus and I burst into tears. The Rebbe asked why I was crying and I answered that I had only come to New York to be by the Rebbe and to learn in the yeshiva. The Rebbe stopped and studied me, and finally said: "Since you have transferred all your affairs to kedusha, you should sit here and learn for a few months time and afterwards we will see."

"I felt that the Rebbe could peer into a person's soul and know all before it was spoken and I was consumed with a burning desire to tell the Rebbe everything about myself. I did so and when I finished I asked the Rebbe for a way to do teshuvah. The Rebbe's reply was that first I must immerse myself in Torah and Mitzvos b'simcha and only afterwards, we would discuss teshuvah (Over the years, from time to time, I would remind the Rebbe in yechidus about his promise that he would speak to me about teshuvah. During the farbrengen of Vov Tishrei, 5742, the Rebbe did indeed explain the concept of teshuvah and I felt the Rebbe's words were directed to me.)

A SPECIAL CONNECTION

"During that period in 5718 I would enter the Rebbe's room whenever I desired. I don't think anybody knew about it then. The notion of mazkirus didn't exist by me; not that I ignored it, but rather I simply had no idea there was such a thing at all. It was highly unusual for anyone to enter the Rebbe's room whenever he so wished, but to me it was natural. I felt that if the Rebbe was everything for me then there was no problem to approach him at anytime.

"After Maariv upstairs I would watch the Rebbe go to his room. If the Rebbe left his door slightly open I considered it to be my cue that I could go in. I waited for everyone to leave and then I would go downstairs and use the inner staircase going up to gan eden hatachton. I would knock on the door and enter the Rebbe's room."

Reb Reuven had been a chossid for less than a year but the Rebbe cared for him like a child. Towards the end of one yechidus the Rebbe told him to hurry to the

dining room in time for supper. The Rebbe asked him, "Will you eat?" He said yes. The Rebbe then said "I will be sure to ask you what you have eaten." Reb Reuven hurried to supper and ate as much as he could. In the meantime the Rebbe went to visit his mother, Rebbetzin Chana, and on the way back, met Reb Reuven on the side walk in front of 770. The Rebbe turned to him and asked "Nu, you ate?" He nodded. "What did you eat?" Reb Reuven began listing each food and the exact amount that he had eaten. The Rebbe smiled broadly and said, "If you say so, it is probably true."



That last statement meant so much to him that he could not contain himself. "Rebbe, to you I will never lie!"

The Rebbe then ascended the steps and entered 770 with a wide smile spread across his face.

On another occasion, the Rebbe told Reb Reuven that he must take a walk outside for fifteen to thirty minutes every day. So the next day after lunch, instead of walking

straight back to 770, he made a detour and walked around a few blocks. On the way back to 770 he saw the Rebbe returning from visiting his mother. Reb Yisroel Duchman was walking behind the Rebbe and, being of very broad build, he provided good cover for Reb Reuven to watch the Rebbe from the back. Suddenly the



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Rebbe turned around and smiled in his direction. Reb Yisroel jerked back and upon seeing Reb Reuven he exclaimed "Hey Dunin, to me the Rebbe doesn't smile...."

In general, Reb Reuven would see the Rebbe very often, and in unusual times as well – like when the zal was empty or early Shabbos morning etc. Most times when they would see each other the Rebbe would smile, but not every time. Once on Shabbos Nachamu, Reb Reuven entered the Rebbe's room and the Rebbe spoke to him about Tisha B'av and cried profusely.

A UNIQUE SHLICHUS

After Channukah, 5719, and after half a year in the Rebbe's presence, it was time for Reb Reuven to return to Eretz Yisroel. The Rebbe told him in yechidus that it had come time for him to go to a place where the Rebbe

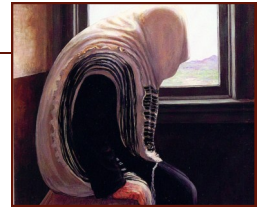
is not physically present and to work according to the Rebbe's directives – and the Rebbe made a movement with his hand towards Eretz Yisroel. The Rebbe then gave him his mission: He was to live and work on heavy machinery in an area where many people would see him.

The Rebbe understood that the task he was giving was especially hard for him; he saw the Rebbe daily and in the hours that he didn't, he imagined the Rebbe standing by him. He didn't have anything else in the world except for the Rebbe. He also feared that if he left the Rebbe's presence, he would not be able to live the way a chossid should. The Rebbe calmed him and said that a Rebbe stays with his Chassidim, even in negative situations. The Rebbe encouraged him and said the following words: "Have no fear. Go, for I am with you."

These words infused Reb Reuven with the strength he needed to fulfill the task the Rebbe gave him. Still, leaving the Rebbe was very hard. A few days later when he and two other bochurim got into the car that would take them to the airport, the Rebbe stood on the steps of 770 and watched the car pull away. Reb Reuven looked out the back window and when he could no longer see the Rebbe, he burst into tears....

As earlier said, Reb Reuven returned to Eretz Yisroel with one directive – to live and find a job as a tractorist in a very public area. Finding such a job wasn't easy, but after much effort he landed a job at a quarry in Chaifa, near a very busy intersection. The work was very hard and if not for the knowledge that thousands of people driving to and from work every day would see him, and that this was exactly what the Rebbe had intended, he would have left the job early on.

Understandably, the sight of a bearded Chassidic Jew on a tractor made an incredible impression on all who saw him. Soon, he became a known figure in the streets of Chaifa and people would stop him in the street or on the train and throw him comments, such as "good job" or "keep up the good work". In this way he was able to reach many people who otherwise would never talk to a religious Jew, and he managed to bring hundreds of Jews to the Rebbe and to Lubavitch. In fact, still as a bochur, when he had thoughts of moving out of Chaifa, the Rebbe told him that because he already has a 'son' and 'grandson' in Chaifa he is obligated to remain in the city. By 'son' the Rebbe was referring to Reb Yosef Marton



from Kfar Chabad who Reb Reuven was *mekarev* to Chassidus and by 'grandson' the Rebbe was referring to Reb Ephraim Levin who was *niskarev* through another *mekurav* of his.

UFARATZTA

Two years following his return to Eretz Yisroel, Reb Reuven married into the famous Sonnenfeld family from Yerushalayim. His father-in-law wanted him to live nearby in Yerushalayim, but Reb Reuven wanted to remain in the irreligious sector of Chaifa as per the Rebbe's wishes.

Half a year after his chassunah, Reb Reuven travelled to New York with his wife. It had been almost three years since he had left 770 and he felt he couldn't continue without seeing the Rebbe again. Upon entering yechidus, he handed the Rebbe the keys to the new apartment he had recently moved into. The Rebbe took the keys, deposited them in the drawer of the desk and said: "If so, I am the baal habayis."

When they returned to Chaifa, they immediately sent the deed of the house to the Rebbe but the Rebbe sent it back with a letter explaining that it wasn't the papers that would define the ownership, rather, it would depend on whether the general behavior in the house is befitting for the one who owns it.

Over the years, Reb Reuven received countless *horaos* from the Rebbe concerning every move he made. He travelled often to the Rebbe and merited highly unusual *kiruvim* from the Rebbe in yechidus. One time, upon entering the room for yechidus, the Rebbe greeted him with a big smile and exclaimed, "Quick, Reb Reuven, tell me something joyful." Reb Reuven was stunned. Not knowing what to reply he simply said, "Everything should be exactly the way the Rebbe wills it." The Rebbe responded, "It should be much more. How much does the Rebbe demand already?"

On another occasion the Rebbe asked him in yechidus if he had purchased any gifts to bring back for his family. He answered that he didn't buy anything because he did not have enough money. The Rebbe removed 300 dollars from his drawer and handed it to him, instructing him to approach Rabbi Leibel Groner and have him ask his wife for help in purchasing appropriate gifts for the entire family.



REB REUVEN ACCOMPANYING REB DOVID RASKIN ON HIS SHLICHUS TO ERETZ YISROEL IN THE SUMMER OF 5733.



BEIS CHABAD

Although he worked on the tractor up to ten hours a day, Reb Reuven worked tirelessly for Hafatzas Hayahadus and Hafatzas Hamayanos. At night, after returning from a long day of work, he would begin his 'ufaratzta' activities. His house was open, and people, young and old, would walk right in off the street. Groups from Hashomer Hatzair and other youth organizations would

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come visit him, many of them eventually becoming Chassidim and raising Lubavitcher families. The list of people and families, who were brought closer to yiddishkeit and Lubavitch in his z'chus, is endless.

Reb Reuven once recounted: "One night I schlepped home with me a group from the anti-religious league. I became very close to many of them and one in particular, Reb Ephraim Lev, became a chossid, and he and his family moved to Kfar Chabad. When visiting their home years later in Kfar Chabad, Reb Ephraim and his wife confided in me that they had become religious not because of the things I had told them, but rather because I had showed up at their house in Chaifa one time driving my tractor. I was accustomed to spending my work breaks visiting different friends and acquaintances and apparently I had visited them once as well."

After many years he stopped working on the tractor and dedicated his time solely to Hafatzas Hayahadus. He remained in Chaifa and opened a Beis Chabad where he continued to bring people closer to Yiddishkeit and

Chassidus. He had a very unique way of expressing his thoughts and ideas, and people felt that he truly meant every word he said. He was often very blunt and direct, but his words came purely from his heart and therefore entered the hearts of those who heard them.

At one point, Reb Reuven felt that he wasn't properly fulfilling the Rebbe's expectations. The next time he was in yechidus, he told the Rebbe that he didn't feel that he was acting the way the Rebbe wanted him to. He requested that if he was truly conducting himself properly, the Rebbe should give him something special to take back home with him to Eretz Yisroel. The Rebbe gave each child an extra coin and to Reb Reuven, he handed a Tanya and a Siddur to put in "his house in Chaifa". When he told the Rebbe again that he feels he is working on behalf of himself, the Rebbe told him that all his affairs belong to the Rebbe and that if he will fulfill his mission with joy then that will help the Rebbe as well, until it will be "שמחה פורץ גדר עד הענין דיעלה לפניו הפורץ"! "דא מלכא משיחא"!

Which brings us to another story:

On one of his first visits, Reb Reuven met the Rebbe outside 770 and inquired as to when the Rebbe will come to Eretz Yisroel. The Rebbe answered that he will come with Moshiach Tzidkeinu. Reb Reuven then asked if the Rebbe will come to Chaifa as well and the Rebbe answered that *im yirtzeh Hashem* he will come to Chaifa as well. The Rebbe then paused for a moment and said "It could very well be tomorrow."

When Reb Reuven returned to Chaifa, he decided that when the Rebbe does indeed come to Chaifa, he will want to pay a visit to "his house," so he made a special chair just for the Rebbe to sit on. One of his *mekuravim* who worked in expensive furniture built a special chair that looked very similar to the one the Rebbe used in 770. And until today the chair remains in the house, waiting...

Reb Reuven passed away on Yud Aleph Av 5762 leaving thousands of people from a wide range of backgrounds feeling orphaned. He was a shining example of what it means for a chossid to live every moment of one's life, totally dedicated to the Rebbe and his *horaos*. Reb Reuven showed that even when a chossid may be far from his Rebbe in distance, nevertheless in mind, heart and soul he can be very close. ■