

CHOF AV - 5704

HISTALKUS OF RAV LEVI YITZCHOK

The following are selections from the book "Rabbi, Mystic, Leader", telling the story of Rav Levi Yitzchok's final few months until his untimely Histalkus on Chof Av, 5704. Bear in mind that this is merely a partial description of these occurrences (space permitting). For the comprehensive story in its entirety, it is advisable to read as it appears in the original book. Our story begins towards the end of the fifth year of Rav Levi Yitzchok's exile; winter, 5704.*

As the upheaval of war was slowly subsiding, the refugees who had fled to the region began to seek ways to return where they had come from, now that those areas were freed from Nazi domination. The Rav's situation, however, remained unchanged; a prisoner in exile was not allowed to go where he wished.

One day during this period, the Rav and Rebbetzin received a telegram from Tashkent. Part of the Jewish community in Moscow had temporarily settled in that city, and they had announced that they would attempt to help anyone who turned to them for assistance. Their telegram stated that they had received a cable sent by the Rav and the Rebbetzin's oldest son, the future Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, from the U.S.A., inquiring as to the whereabouts of his parents

and his uncle, Rabbi Shmuel Schneerson, the Rav's brother. The Rav and Rebbetzin immediately requested that they cable a response, notifying him of their present address.

Several weeks later they received a telegram directly from their son. However, it was written in English, and with the exception of the name of the sender, they were unable to decipher it. After an entire week of searching for someone who can help them, Rebbetzin Chana finally located a school teacher who knew a little bit of English. The Rebbetzin trekked four kilometers to meet this woman, who, with great difficulty, managed to translate the telegram.

It had been quite a while since they heard from their son, so the receipt of this telegram was very encouraging shortly thereafter they received two parcels of food

from him in the mail, which improved the economic situation.

•

Indeed from the distant shores of the United States, Rabbi Menachem Mendel was doing all in his power to alleviate his parents' distress. This was no simple feat: to reach Rabbi Levi Ytzchok, one could do very little from the United States, instead, Rabbi Menachem Mendel wrote to one of these Chasidim:

"...it is already nearly a year since I sent you one hundred and fifty shekel, asking you by telegram to send food packages to my parents in exile. I wrote to you later again about this. But to date, I have not received a response whether these packages did indeed reach then and, in general, about their well being. I will therefore ask you once again to please favor me with a response- even just a few short lines- about the package

* Published by Kehos; reprinted here with special permission.

and, more importantly about their well-being, I await your earliest response..."

Rabbi Menachem Mendel also sent aid packages to his parents through the world Jewish

Kuybyshev, Russia, to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneerson. The Rebbe, in turn, did all humanly possible to assist them, even recruiting the chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Her-

these crucial messages for months.

For his part Rabbi Menachem Mendel was beside himself with grief. In one of his many letters to his exiled parents, he expressed his anguish by writing, "I shall never forgive myself for emigrating from the Soviet Union and leaving you behind..."



THE HOUSE WHERE THE SCHNEERSON FAMILY LIVED BEFORE THE ARREST

congress, which had the political clout to send such essential items to needy Jews scattered throughout the Soviet Union. In all, the world Jewish congress verified the shipment of no less than five packages to Rabbi Levi Yitzchok in his remote location of exile.

The Rabbi's plight pained many fellow Chassidim living in the Soviet Union. Powerless to assist or react to Rabbi Levi Yitzchok, Rabbi Mordechai Dublin, formerly of Riga, Latvia, expressed deep grief about his circumstances in a letter sent from

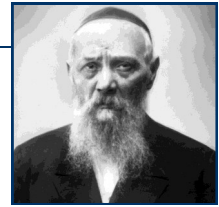
zog, and the Colel Chabad institute, to send Rabbi Levi Yitzchok and his family visas for the land of Israel. Though Colel Chabad tried arduously to fulfill this request, these efforts were hampered and did not succeed.

Periodically, Rabbi Levi Yitzchok himself wrote letters to his son in America, apprising him of their dire situation and asking for details about the new life in America. Though his letters were paid for and marked "express", the Russian censors found it appropriate to delay

In 1944, as the five years of Rabbi Levi Yitzchok's term of exile were nearing completion, his physical condition began deteriorate. Though unaware of this, a serious illness was spreading through his body, severely weakening him. The Rav, with the Rebbetzin Chana, eagerly looked forward to the day they would be free again. But then a distressing report reached them: no prisoner would be freed until after the war ended, and even then, they would be permitted to settle only in cities and towns that did not have sizeable populations.

The reservoir of strength which had sustained the Rav through the years of exile was well-nigh exhausted. This unexpected blow shattered his resolve and sapped his stamina at a time when it was most needed. By this time, the malignant disease which eventually took his life had already fastened its grip on his body (as they were to learn at a later date) and this probably contributed to his state of depression.

Earlier on, Rabbi Levi Yitzchok had not sat idly by. He



had written on 23 August 1940, to the Interior Ministry, pleading them to reopen his case and review his standing. After detailing various accusations, the Rav once again categorically denied the

“I SHALL NEVER FORGIVE MYSELF FOR EMIGRATING FROM THE SOVIET UNION AND LEAVING YOU BEHIND...”

charges and decried the brutal imprisonment and interrogations he had endured, ending with a passionate appeal for liberty and justice.

This letter alone took great courage and personified once again the brave stand of Rabbi Levi Yitzchok. Addressing any letter at all to the minister of the interior, who's name alone inspired fear and dread, took great daring. Moreover, Rabbi Levi Yitzchok had actually complained at great length about his interrogators and extended imprisonment- this was an almost unheard phenomenon for the Soviet Union.

Not that this letter helped much. The Ministry forwarded this letter to another department which, in turn, denied Rabbi Levi Yitzchok request after examining it once again. Nothing it seemed, was working in the Rav's favor.

•

Rabbi Levi Yitzchok and Rebbetzin Chana began to look forward to the coming salvation. Many people warned them that they had heard from reliable sources that the authorities were making it difficult for prisoners whose terms of exile had expired, trying to keep them relatively isolated. Their primary concern was that the prisoners not be allowed to live in large cities, whereas returning to their original homes was absolutely forbidden.

In any case, Rabbi Levi Yitzchok and Rebbetzin Chana had no intention of returning to Yekaterinoslav- all the Jews there had been put to death by the Nazis- but they did hope to be allowed to move to a populated, civilized place where they would be able to speak to their son abroad by telephone. This however, was not to be.

In the meantime, they continued to live under the same difficult conditions.

The Chasidim convened an emergency meeting of all the Rav's admirers in Alma-Ata, wherein it was decided immediately to begin intensive efforts to secure the Rav's release. The first hurdle was the acquisition of two indispensable documents: a certificate of release affirming that the prisoners has served his full sentence, and a written statement from the prisoner's daughter that she was prepared to have him live in her house, so that he would not be dependent upon the state.

Acquiring all of the necessary papers cost a fortune.

Some friends contributed tens

of thousands of rubles, which accounted for most of their wealth, and the documents was secured, as for the declaration required from the daughter of the Rav, Mendel's [Rabinowitz] wife signed a pledge to take the prisoners into her house.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchok and Rebbetzin Chana had assumed that



the entire process would be finished in just a few weeks, enabling them to celebrate Pesach in Alma-Ata. However, this was not to be. Owing to a series of complex obstacles, the matter dragged on for more than six weeks.

They were weeks of nerve-racking apprehension. Rebbetzin Chana then realized that the Rav could not continue in this manner- his physical and spiritual debilitation were painfully apparent. At times there would be a

resurgence of his former strength, but only after tremendous effort on his part...

ALMA-ATA

...On the Thursday after Pesach, the Rav and Rebbetzin arrived in Alma-Ata. A crowd of well wishers had assembled to greet them at the railroad station, but because the train was so far behind schedule, the reception never took place. A large number of people of obviously Jewish appearance waiting at the station for so long a time with bound to attract undesirable attention, and in any case, it was important that there not be undue publicity surrounding the Rav's arrival.

A very warm reception was held at the home of one of the local community leaders. Friends and acquaintances gathered around the Rav, most prominent among them the Rabinowitz

brothers, Mendel and Hershel who had worked tirelessly for the Rav's release. At last, the Rav found himself among Chassidim and other religious Jews, just the sort of company he had longed for during the years of his exile.

On Shabbos the Rav gave a talk in the Shul. This was an act that was fraught with danger, since the authorities inevitably found counter-revolutionary tendencies in every public speech. The Rav, however, was not deterred in the least by the inherent risk.

A Kiddush and communal Shabbos meal followed the conclusion of the davening. The Rav delivered a Maamor, something he had not been able to do for five long years, and everyone present was deeply impressed by the content of his words.

The news of the Rav's move to Alma-Ata had spread quickly

throughout the city so that, fearing unpleasant repercussions, certain officials had to be paid "to look the other way".

The temporary residence that the Rav and Rebbetzin moved into soon became a central meeting place, on account of the constant stream of visitors.

Because the house faced the street, the people coming in and out were highly visible, especially since many of them were Chassidic Jews with their distinctive appearance.

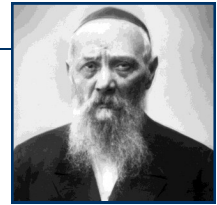
The danger in having so many callers was all the more acute during the daytime, when the stifling heat made it necessary to keep the windows open. In the evening, however, with the waning of the sun's rays, a cool breeze arose and it became possible to close the shutters and prevent anyone in the street from making out what was happening inside the house.

Later in the evening, the Rav and his guests would go out to the yard, where the younger ones sat around him on the soft grass. It is difficult to describe the spiritual gratification the Rav provided them during these nocturnal discussions at which everyone eagerly drank in his words. Although they were liable to pay dearly for spending time with the Rav, they disregarded the risks and continued to come regularly.

By this time the Rav was exceedingly thin and weak. Never-



LEFT: RAV LEVI YITZCHOK'S SHUL IN YAKETRINESLAV



theless, the moment that he opened his mouth to speak words of Torah, he was transformed – his face glowed, his voice waxed strong, and his listeners would forget that this gushing fountain of wisdom was a sick, frail man.

The number of visitors continued to increase. In addition, representatives from each of the Jewish congregations in town came to see the Rav, either with an invitation for him to serve as the Rabbi and leader of the shul,

or simply that he address their congregation.

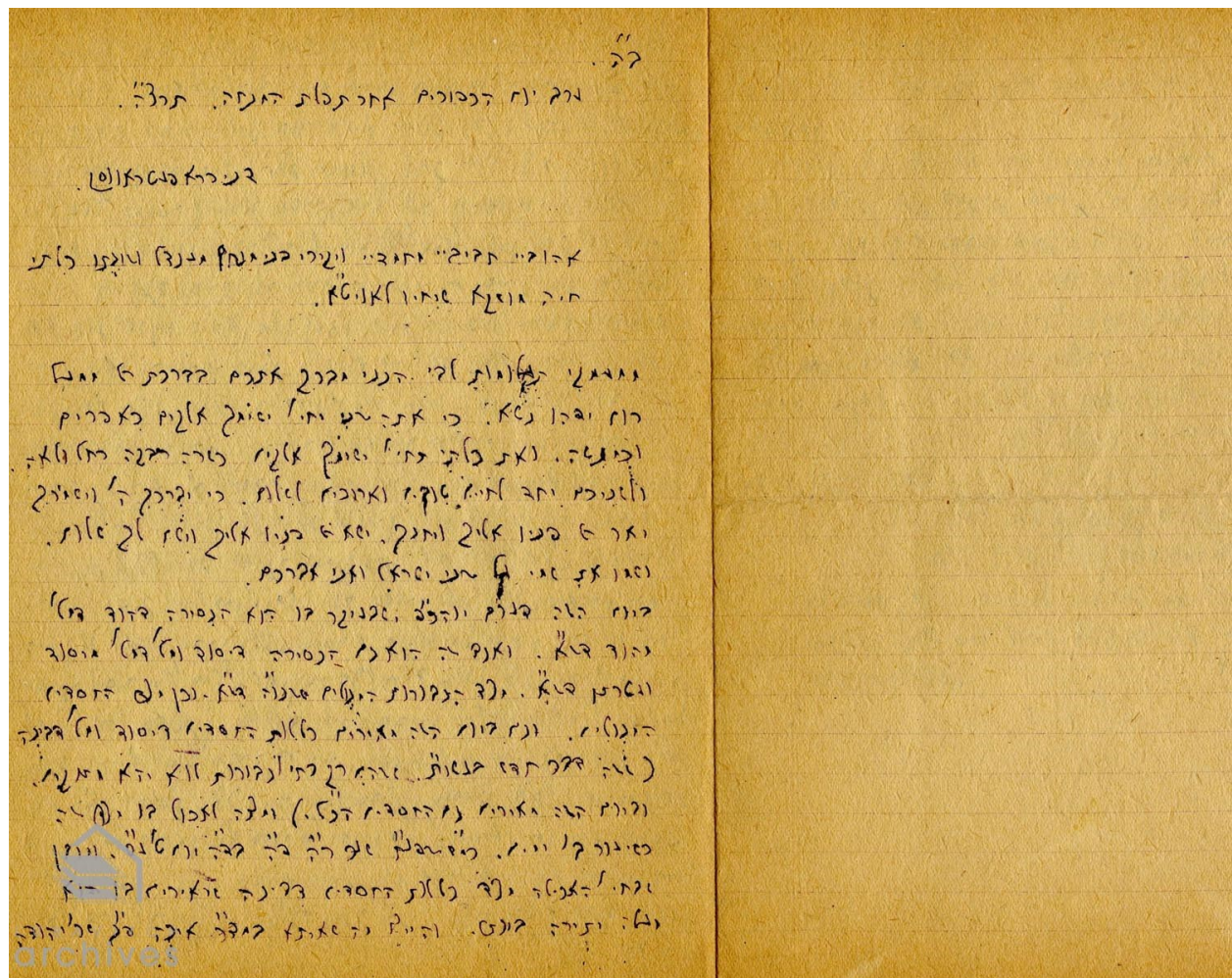
The community in Alma-Ata provided for the Rav and Rebbet-

zin's physical and financial needs in a generous and honorable manner.

•

...HIS FACE GLOWED, HIS VOICE WAXED STRONG, AND HIS LISTENERS WOULD FORGET THAT THIS GUSHING FOUNTAIN OF WISDOM WAS A SICK, FRAIL MAN.

A LETTER FROM RAV LEVI YITCHZOK TO THE REBBE AND REBBETZIN



Shortly before Shavuot, the community rented a dwelling for the Rav and Rebbetzin on a long-term basis. It was a lovely place, with two large rooms and a porch and was surrounded by trees.

In this residence Rav Levi Yitzchak was able to have a special table for use as a desk, as well as space to keep the various books he had managed to accumulate. He spent all of his time

They were aware that in virtually every gathering of Jews-especially one in a shul- the presence of an informer was almost a certainty. Indeed, it was later verified that such a person had indeed been present at the Rav's talk, and within a few days, government agents were calling on several of the people who were connected with the shul.

Agents came to the Rav's house, too. The Rav was lying in

Alma-Ata, Rav Levi Yitzchak became a ready target for many anti-Semitic residents of the city. One neighbor, a non-Jew, felt so threatened by the renewed religious activity in his area that he approached Rav Levi Yitzchak and threatened him openly. "I'll go the police!" he shouted. "Stop your infernal activities here!"

When Chassidim heard of this encounter, they became very apprehensive. Rav Levi Yitzchak lived, in essence, on trial – the authorities were literally salivating for the next possible opportunity to imprison him. The Rav had just barely survived his imprisonment and exile – who knew what a single complaint to the police could bring? Any protestation about renewed religious activity would bring Rav Levi Yitzchak catastrophic punishment.

Mendel Rabinowitz, out of great devotion and self-sacrifice, came to the rescue once again. Dressed in official army uniform, he bravely banged on the door of Rav Levi Yitzchak's neighbor, and began bellowing as soon as the unfortunate fellow greeted him, warning him of severe repercussions if he dared complain about his new neighbor – "that Jewish rabbi".

His ruse worked. The neighbor expressed a sincere promise never to bother his neighbor again!

Though they knew that the police tried tracking visitors to Rav Levi Yitzchak's home, neighboring Jews continued visiting the Rav. As one individual put it, "For someone of the stature of Rav Levi Yitzchak, one is permit-

SUDDENLY RAV LEVI YITZCHAK OPENED HIS EYES, ASKED FOR SOME WATER TO WASH HIS HANDS, AND SAID: "IT IS TIME TO PREPARE FOR THE JOURNEY TO THE OTHER SIDE..."

writing, up until two weeks before he passed away, but his handwriting was unclear. At first, Rebbetzin Chana thought he was writing a will, but afterwards she saw that he was recording Torah thoughts.

•

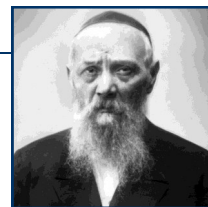
On Shavuot, the Rav went to shul and, his weakness notwithstanding, delivered a long sermon. He spoke sharply about the need to adhere to the Torah, despite the government's attempts to stifle Jewish observance.

The Rav's words totally captivated the congregation, and for a short time they were able to transcend the harsh conditions of their lives. Nevertheless, the pleasure derived from his speech was accompanied by an anxiety over the possible consequences.

bed, and answered their questions from that position. It is easy to imagine how such visits left the Rav and Rebbetzin full of dread. Once they even took his and the Rebbetzin's passports, and since it was inadvisable for the Rav to present himself at the N.K.V.D offices, Rebbetzin Chana had to go to retrieve them. She slipped the appropriate employee a generous gift and suddenly everything was "Kosher"-she promptly returned the passports. After this, however, she was apprehensive that perhaps his file would pass to a person who had never been bribed. Thus they lived in an atmosphere of considerable trepidation.

•

As his home became a central meeting place for Jews living in



ted to endanger his life.”

•

The non-Jewish elders of the city accorded Rabbi Levi Yitzchak great respect, recognizing him as a personage of superior stature. In fact, when disagreement arose between the elders, they would send a delegation to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak and put their problems before him, listening silently as he responded to their quarries. Whatever the Rav said they immediately accepted as true and just; his word was final.

THE RAV'S ILLNESS

One Shabbos, several dozen men came to the Rav's house to hear words of Torah from him. By that time the Rav was writhing in pain from his illness and unable to tolerate the sensation of a garment touching his skin. He therefore dressed simply in a long black Chasidic robe, apologizing to his guest for appearing in this manner in public. "A person gets what he deserves" he remarked.

The Rav then began to speak, and words of Torah flowed from his lips for several hours. Were it not for his appearance and mode of dress, it would have been possible to think he was a perfectly healthy man.

•

As the weeks went by, the disease which has been ravaging the Rav's body deepened its hold, and the pain which it caused him grew steadily worst. A physician examined the Rav frequently and treated him on a regular basis, and occasionally, two other Doctors would examine him as well. Seeing that there was no improvement in his condition, the three made contact with a well-known Leningrad Professor who was in charge of the main military hospital there. It was virtually impossible to get him to leave his post to see a patient privately, and only after an energetic campaign that involved the intercession of several people who had access to him, and bestowal of a

handsome gift, did he consent to see the Rav.

The professor, a gentile, was a religious man, and after being informed about the Rav's stature, agreed to make the trip to see him, even though he neither had the time nor authorization to do so.

Upon seeing the Rav, the Professor immediately diagnosed the illness. His facial expression revealed the true nature of the patient's condition, and the Rav too could read it on the Professor's face.

The Rav told the Professor everything he had gone through since his arrest. "What did these people want from me?" he wept. "and what have they done to me?"

Afterwards the Professor commented that throughout his long career, he had never before encountered a person as extraordinary as the Rav.

•

The disease grew progressive-

NIGGUN HAKAFOS

One of the most joyous and memorable niggunim sung with the Rebbe, and often started by the Rebbe himself was the famous Hakafos niggun of Rav Levi Yitzchok. Below you will read of a few of those moments with the Rebbe throughout the years.

Generally, the Rebbe began from the middle of the niggun – the liveliest stanza. This is the stanza the Rebbe would often instruct the Chassidim to repeat while singing, sometimes even ten times. As a matter of fact, on Simchas Torah day, 5748 ("Tismach"), this stanza was repeated 125 times over!

Beginning from the year 5748 and on, it was with this *niggun* that the Rebbe danced at his own *Hakofa*, in addition to the regular *Hakofos niggun*. (This was when the Rebbe danced at his own *Hakofa* alone, after Rashag was not well enough to join).

In the later years (from 5746 and on), it was with this *niggun* that the Rebbe would dance while standing in his place at Farbrengens more than with any other.

EARLY YEARS

During farbrengens in the earlier years, it was not common for the Rebbe to ask to sing the *niggun* of his father, Reb Levik, as he did with *niggunim*

ly worse. Since the Rav couldn't tolerate anybody other than Rebetzin Chana tending to him, he would not permit volunteers from the community to help with his care. Nevertheless, all felt a personal obligation to visit and lend a hand, and even when it became clear that the battle was lost and he did not have long to live, people devotedly did whatever they could for him, hoping somehow to alleviate his suffering.

A short while later, the professor returned to examine him again. One of his directives was that the patient be taken out to the porch frequently for fresh air. This entailed the acquisition of another bed, which was a problem—such things were difficult to obtain in those days, even for wealthy families. Nevertheless, within a few hours of the community learning of the doctor's order, four beds stood in the Rav's front yard!

Reb Levi Yitzchok was deeply touched by the local people's devotion to him. Realizing what

his presence meant to them and how much they needed him, the Rav prayed for his own full recovery so that he can faithfully serve them with all of his capabilities.

When the Rav's condition worsened to the point that he was completely bedridden, the Doctor ordered that the patient's bed be placed next to a window that would be kept open permanently to allow fresh air to enter. Since the window had to be opened throughout the night as well, it became necessary to install iron bars as protection against thieves. But where were they to acquire such bars?

A man from Kharkov who worked in a military factory had endangered himself by acquiring the materials and doing the job, together with another worker whom he had brought along. By the following morning, the bars have been installed.

This friend from Kharkov stayed at the Rav and Rebitzins' home for a few more days and helped them with various repair

jobs. It pained him greatly to see the Rav's grave condition, and he once exclaimed, "Rabbi, must you suffer so? Better that I should suffer instead of you!"

•

Rav Levi Yitzchok's condition worsened steadily. Additional Doctors who examined him shook their heads despairingly. Less than three weeks before his passing, on Shabbos Matos-Masai, the Rav spoke at length about world events, and called on his small audience to strengthen their adherence to the Torah and its mitzvos. "Matos means staffs" he explained. "Allegorically, this refers to the two staffs of Stalin and Hitler, who struck out against the Jews. Both shared the same agenda; both aspired to the same goal. The difference is only that Hitler is out to exterminate the Jewish Body, while Stalin is also determined to vanquish the Jewish Soul".

The small group gathered around Rav Levi Yitzchok's table listening in fascination, but stiffened uneasily when the door

from the other Rabbe'im. However, at the Chof Av Farbrengen of 5714, which marked ten years from the Histalkus, to the surprise of the assembled crowd, the Rebbe requested that a niggun of his father be sung.

Rabbi Tuvia Bloi writes in his diary:

The first time the words "*Hayom T'amtzeinu*" (which are said at the end of Mussaf on the Yomim Noraim) were sung to the tune of Reb Levik's niggun, was at Mussaf on Rosh Hashona 5723, by the Chazzen Reb Shmuel Zalmanov.

Later on in the afternoon, when the Rebbe came down for Mincha (or after Mincha) the Rebbe said to

Reb Shmuel: "Yasher Koach for the niggun of '*Hayom T'amtzeinu*'".

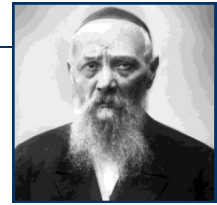
A NEW NIGGUN

At the seuda of Shmini Atzeres, 5729, Reb Levik's niggun was discussed:

Reb Zalman Duchman: There is a niggun attributed to the Rebbe's father – Reb Levik's niggun – others say that the Alter Rebbe sang this niggun during Hakafos.

Rashag: I also have heard this

RZD: Rebbetzin Chana – the Rebbe's mother –



opened and the father of a hated communist entered the room. Though the father had remained a faithful Jew, the communist son used his father's naiveté to learn information about the Rav and his latest activities. "Please stop," the Rav's admirers begged him. "These words might incriminate

tents. Much later, after the Rav's passing, a close friend opened the letter and found it contained a message regarding the passing of Rabbi Shmuel Schneerson, the Rav's brother. Apparently the Rav had divined its contents and knew that he lacked the necessarily strength to handle such

having his head-tefillin knot lay in a specific spot, they stayed near him to readjust the head tefillin accordingly throughout his prayers.

When Reb Yakov Yosef related that he had just performed a bris on a four-year-old child, the Rav's face lit up and he grabbed Reb Yakov Yosef hand excitedly. With great emotion, the Rav described the tremendous spiritual effect of such a mitzvah and went on to discuss various Kabbalistic ideas symbolized by the number four. Another Chossid devoted to the Rav's needs was Reb Yosef Nimotin, to whom Rav Levi Yitzchok showed great appreciation for his efforts.

One Shabbos afternoon, when a small crowd had gathered to hear the Rav discuss Chasidus and Kabbalah, Rav Levi Yitzchok complained of his weak health. The crowd began to disperse but the Rav did not allow Reb Yosef to leave and invited him to remain for the Shabbos meal.

"WHEN I AWOKE THIS MORNING, I FELT THAT MY FATHER WAS GONE. I KNEW I WOULD RECEIVE WORD OF THIS SOONER OR LATER, SO I CAME TO THE OFFICE AND WAITED."

you." Rav Levi Yitzchok halted in mid-sentence, leaving his listeners to wonder what else he had left unfinished.

Around that time, a letter arrived addressed to Reb Levi Yitzchok. "No one should open that letter now," the Rav said, arousing curiosity about its con-

devastating news.

In his last weeks, critical ill and confined to bed, Rav Levi Yitzchok relied on others to help him don Tefillin. Reb Yakov Yosef Raskin and his sons visited the Rav often, and they came to help him with his tefillin. Knowing the Rav precise Minhag of

told me that her husband was accustomed to singing this niggun by Hakafos.

The Rebbe: I also heard this niggun from my father, but I never asked him about its source. When I was in Rostov and Petersburg, I did not hear this sung by the Friediker Rebbe's Hakafos.

At the Chai Elul farbrengen of 5732, the Rebbe requested the Chassidim to sing "The *Simchas Torah'diker niggun*".

They sang the common Hakafos niggun. When they finished the Rebbe said, "This is a good niggun, but I was referring to 'Dem Tatten's niggun'".

They then sang Reb Levik's Hakafos niggun.

At many different occasions, the Rebbe started his father's niggun; during farbrengens, after distributing bottles of Mashke, or while walking in and out of shul.

From the year 5750 and on, the Rebbe always began this niggun following the distribution of *Mashke* at the Shabbos farbrengens. (Until then, the Rebbe would usually sing "*Ve'harikosi lachem brocha...*")

One Friday, the local Doctor summoned Reb Yosef to procure a certain medicine. “But how is the Rav?” asked Reb Yosef Worriedly.

The Doctor pursed his lips. “That is not why I called you,” he said. “Just get him that medicine.”

Reb Yosef did get the medicine and brought it over to the Rav’s home. The next day, Shabbos, a messenger to call Reb Yosef and his wife to Rav Levi Yitzchok’s home. They found him lying in bed, greatly weakened, but he opened his eyes and beckoned the couple to approach his bed, showering them with blessings for their devoted care and assistance. Shortly after, Rav Levi Yitzchok lost consciousness. Later on Reb Yosef returned to the Rav’s house, where he found wandering around and crying bitterly. Asking her what had happened, she replied “When I went into the Rav’s room I found him lying in bed, weeping. I

asked him why he was crying and he said, ‘With whom will I leave you?’”

“Don’t worry,” Reb Yosef assured her, “something tells me I don’t quite know what- that you will be reunited with your sons.” Rebitzin Chana reacted with a startled look, as if to say that that would be practically impossible!

During the Rav’s last few days, he said to a visitor, “look how weak I am.” Pointing to his wasted flesh, he remarked: “I don’t even have the capacity to taste food any longer....”

Throughout the final period of Rav Levi Yitzchok’s life, many of the Rav’s admirers and followers risked their livelihood by spending time at his bedside instead of their required jobs. In Russia of old, this alone could amount to treason and its dangerous ramifications it was mandatory for all workers to meet a certain daily quota- being absent put their positions at peril. Yet, the Rav’s influence alone war-

ranted this great personal sacrifice. These simple Jews were willing to do anything to spend a few hours more near this great personage, even if it meant turning their backs on their homes and jobs.

People of all persuasions came to visit Rav Levi Yitzchok in those final moments. The outer layer that differentiates one Jew from another vanished entirely; all were united in his presence.

END OF A SAINTLY LIFE

On Tuesday night, the eve of 20 Menachem Av, the Rav lay with his eyes closed, his lips moving incessantly, yet silently. Suddenly Rav Levi Yitzchok opened his eyes, asked for some water to wash his hands, and said: “It is time to prepare for the journey to the other side...”

Those were his last audible words.

The next morning, the Rav’s condition became critical. Writheing in terrible pain, several times

BIRKAS HACHAMA CEREMONY

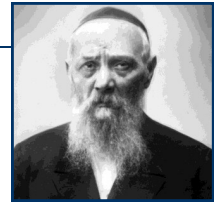
On 4 Nissan 5741, the Rebbe held a grand Birkas HaChama ceremony in the street outside 770. It began with the Alter Rebbe’s *niggun*, followed immediately by Rav Levi Yitzchok’s *Hakofos niggun*.

THE TRUE RA’ASH!

At the farbrengen of 12 Sivan, 5744, the Rebbe invited all the Rabbonim present to say L’chaim, and with a great *Shturem* – a “*Rabbonisher Shturem!*”

As it seems, the Rebbe was anticipating that a joyous Niggun would accompany the Le’chaim (especially considering that he had specifically instructed that it be done with a “*Rabbonisher*

Shturem”) but the Shul remained relatively silent, so the Rebbe said: “We know that Tzaddikim are likened to their Creator, all the more so Rabbonim. Therefore, they act like Him in a sense that even a most quiet voice (“*Kol d’mama daka...*”) is considered a loud roar, capable of breaking through mountain and stone. We however, are *Ballei-batim*, not Rabbonim; we will therefore make a ‘true noise!’” With that, the Rebbe began his father’s Hakafos niggun, and encouraged the singing immensely.



he gestured that he be raised in a sitting position or turned on his side.

Reb Hershel Rabinowitz, the faithful assistant who stood ready at the Rav's bedside at all hours, put his ears near Rav Levi Yitzchak's lips to hear what he was saying, but all he heard were fragmented sentences accompanied by deep, anguished sighing: "Ay, his footsteps are not known (Kapitul 77) ...Ay, the footsteps of Moshiach ... Ay, the footsteps of Moshiach."

In the late afternoon, when his condition deteriorated further, a doctor was summoned and he prescribed several medicines to ease Rav Levi Yitzchak's suffering. Rav Levi Yitzchak did, in fact, take some of the medicine.

As the hours went by, Rebbetzin Chana felt overcome by exhaustion. Knowing that friends would not leave the Rav's bedside for a moment, she went to take a short rest, hoping to conserve

some energy to resume her watch at the Rav's side. When she arose a half-hour later, the house was filled with mourners...

The Chassidim approached her with reddened eyes. "Did the Rav leave any specific instructions regarding his funeral and burial?" they asked.

"Yes," she responded quietly. "He requested to be buried in shrouds made of pure linen, and that all who participate in washing and purifying his body should first immerse in a Mikva."

Of course, only those close to the Rav took part in the purification and arrangements for his burial. These were Jews who knew him from Leningrad, from Rostov, and from Kharkov. Theirs was a daunting task indeed: among other obstacles, no Mikva existed in Alma-Ata, obliging them to immerse in a freezing stream a considerable distance away. Reb Yosef Nimotin was ill with fever at the time, yet he immersed anyway, in

order to participate in the purification rites.

BURIAL

The next morning, those taking care of the funeral went to the Jewish cemetery to choose an appropriate spot to serve as the final resting-place of Rav Levi Yitzchak. To ensure that no one unworthy would be buried near the Rav, the Chassidim purchased all six surrounding plots as well.

Finding boards with which to construct a coffin was almost impossible. Instead, the wooden chests that had held the Rav's seforim - and which had served as his table while studying and writing his Torah thoughts - were used to build a coffin. When the coffin arrived at the Rav's house, it aroused the curiosity of pedestrians. To deflect prying eyes, a man who had once worked for the N.K.V.D donned his official uniform and stood at the door, effectively discouraging unwelcome inquiries. Meanwhile,

MOTZOEI TISHAH B'AV

One of the more unexpected times when the Rebbe began this joyous niggun was at the end of the fast of Tishah B'Av, 5751. That year, Tishah B'Av fell out to be on a Shabbos so the fast was postponed until Sunday.

Just before *Maariv* at the end of the fast, the Rebbe said a *sicha*, explaining that Tishah B'Av is the birthday of *Moshiach Tzidkeinu* and is therefore an opportune time for his arrival.

After *Maariv*, on his way out of shul, the Rebbe started to sing his father's niggun! The startled crowd broke out in a joyous dance, continuing long after the fast had already ended.

EREV YOM KIPPUR

Just a few months later, on Erev Yom Kippur, this incident repeated itself. After *Mincha*, the Rebbe said a *sicha* blessing *Anash* before Yom Kippur. The unbelievable statements and expressions about the imminent arrival of Moshiach were unprecedented. Then, at the end of the *sicha*, the Rebbe wished that we will dance into the *geulah* with the most joyous dance, singing the most joyous niggun... And he immediately began to sing his father's *Hakafos niggun*; something quite unexpected on a day as solemn as Erev Yom Kippur. ■

a large crowd of men and women of all ages and backgrounds gathered somberly for the funeral. Though Rav Levi Yitzchak had lived in Alma-Ata for merely four months – and had been very ill most of the time – the community felt a close bond to him and many turned out to pay their final respects.

Thursday at noon, the funeral procession began from the Rav's house. Because it was located several kilometers away, getting to the graveyard on foot would be difficult. But the coffin bearers did not allow for any compromises – the coffin would be shouldered the entire distance. Along the way, the men alternated the honor of bearing the coffin.

The mourners walked in brooding silence. A tower of supreme spiritual strength was gone; a leader's voice was silenced. There would be questions to answer tomorrow – the Russian police would ensure the inevitable barrage of questions: Why did you participate? How did you know Rav Levi Yitzchak? Why do you support religious counter-revolutionaries?

Nothing mattered now. What mattered only was ensuring Rav Levi Yitzchak be accorded due respect on the journey to his final resting-place. No one would step forward to fill the Rav's shoes in that forsaken corner of the U.S.S.R., no one could step up to the brutal Russian machinery that drowned millions in waves of religious apathy and oppression, smothering generations in ignorance.



After the funeral, the crowd returned to the Rav's home. As it was already dark, many entered to recite the evening prayer and comfort Rebbetzin Chana.

The men of the community resolved to form a Minyan for the three daily prayers in Rav Levi Yitzchak's home. After a few days, however, strangers began attending the Minyan. At least one of them, a shoemaker, was rumored to be an informant. Suspicion also fell on a woman who had suddenly decided to "repent" and pray – but only in the Rav's house.

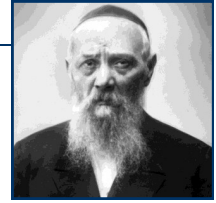
In no time, Reb Hershel Rabinowitz was summoned for questioning, and asked why the funeral had been conducted on such a large scale and why he was so actively involved its arrangement.

This incident and the ever-watchful eyes discouraged the worshippers from participating

in the prayers. As a result, not always could ten people be gathered for a Minyan, but admirers and friends still crowded the house to comfort Rebbetzin Chana, some insisting on staying in the house at night, so that the Rebbetzin would not be left alone. Letters and telegrams poured in from Tashkent, Samarkand, and other places. Some contained funds to help defray whatever debts remained from the Rav's lengthy illness.

THE REBBE IS INFORMED OF THE NEWS

Meanwhile, across the globe, a telegram arrived in Brooklyn, New York, informing the Rebbe of his father's passing. The telegram was delivered to a group of yeshiva students studying at seven-seventy. The bochurim knocked on the Rebbe's office door to bring him the telegram. It was highly irregular for the



Rebbe to be in the office in the early morning, and he explained his change of schedule by simply saying, "When I awoke this morning, I felt that my father was gone. I knew I would receive word of this sooner or later, so I came to the office and waited."

The Rebbe immediately sent a telegram to Kollel Chabad institute of Yerusholayim, informing them of his father's passing and requesting that they pray for the welfare of his mother. For the next three weeks, he did not respond to any correspondence.

Due to his precarious health, aides to the Frierdiker Rebbe did not apprise him of the ill news until after the Shiva period. Heartbroken, the Frierdiker Reb-

be immediately wrote a letter of comfort to his esteemed son-in-law:

"... I have just heard about the terrible tragedy that has befallen us, the passing of my Mechutan, your father, may his soul be bound with the Source of Life. I share in your great grief. May G-d comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

I heard from the Chossid Rabbi Yechiel Halperin, who was in the city of Lubavitch in 5643 – the year after the passing of my grandfather [the Rebbe Maharash] – that my father [the Rebbe Rashab] would study some Mishnah every day (at times interpreting them according to their mystical dimension); he taught a folio

of Talmud to a group of ten people; and, despite his weak health, he personally served as the reader on days when the Torah is read. On Shabbos, he read the Haftarah. During Mincha on Shabbos, he was also called to the Torah.

He said the daily Kaddeishim, seventeen in all. Years later, after the passing of his mother, my father personally served as the Torah reader during the first month... afterward, he stopped for health reasons – although he later regretted doing so.

May G-d grant your mother strength; may she live long and pleasant years, materially and spiritually..."

•



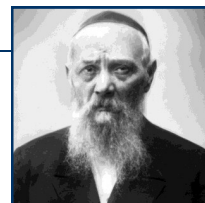
גאולת הכתבים שנשארו

וחבל מאד על שאר הכת"י שלע"ע
לא הגיעו לידינו, שהרי היו עוד
ריבוי כתבים (מלבד הספרים שאמי
בעצמה הסתכנה והביאה
למוסקבה ומשם נשלחו לכאן
במשך הזמן ע"י השגרירות
וכו"ב)...

...ועד היום לא ידוע מה עלה
בגורלם של עשרות ואולי מאות
גליונות החדו"ת של אאמו"ר
הנמצאים אי שם ברוס'י.
ויהי רצון שבמשך הזמן יקויים
היעוד "ובאו האובדים בארץ אשור
והנדחים בארץ מצרים", ועאכו"כ
חידושי תורה, ובפרט - חדו"ת
שנכתבו "מן המיצר", מיצר אמיתי
גדול ביותר בגשמיות...

...ועצם ההחלטה ע"ד לימוד ענינים
חדשים אלו ממהרת את בוא הזמן
שיוכלו לחפש אחר הכתבים גם
במדינה ההיא ולמצוא אותם;
ועוד והוא העיקר - קירוב וזירוז
זמן החידושים בפנימיות התורה
שלאחרי הגאולה האמיתית
והשלימה. ואז עאכו"כ שנזכה
לגילוי חידושים אלו שכבר נכתבו
אלא שנמצאים במקום לא ידוע,
אבל בודאי שהם קיימים...

(משיחת מוצאי ו' תשרי תש"נ)



ERECTING THE "TZIYUN"

Three weeks after the Rav's passing, the community was forced to disband the Minyan in his home, as the owner became unwilling to have people congregate in her house.

The Chassidim who had engaged in the burial process now looked towards a new goal: enclosing the Rav's grave with a fence, as befitting the burial place of a Tzaddik. Despite the severe shortage of iron and cement, they somehow managed to fashion a temporary memorial and enclosure.

With the end of the war, many displaced Jews began returning to their respective cities. Rebbetzin Chana's primary concern was to set up a tombstone. There was no marble available in the entire region, but it was unthinkable to leave without erecting a permanent stone.

When some of the Chassidim heard that a certain government factory received a shipment of large marble blocks from Moscow, they jumped at the opportunity. The chief accountant, a Jew from Leningrad, heard about Rav Levi Yitzchak and was stirred with memories of his deceased grandfather, a great Torah scholar. Through his efforts, they were able to obtain a slab of marble for a tombstone.

But how could they superstitiously remove a slab of marble from a government factory? Like many other difficulties in Russia, the problem was solved by generously bribing the watchman and his immediate superior. That night, the wife of the factory ac-

countant transported the marble to a designated place, and from there it embarked on its journey to the cemetery.

So as not to aggravate any of the authorities, the stone was inscribed simple thus:

Here lies the eminent Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, son of Rabbi Baruch Schneur, who passed away on the 20th day of the month of Menachem Av, in the year 5704 after Creation. May his soul be bound up in everlasting life.

A trip to the cemetery was one fraught with danger, yet there were devoted adherents who would travel secretly to Rav Levi Yitzchak's resting place, to pray at the holy spot and ask for divine deliverance. Some asked for a miracle to leave the Soviet Union; others prayed for ailing relatives; others prayed for easier sustenance. All were helped, each according to his or her respective requests.

Rav Levi Yitzchak's path in life had been a difficult one, a life filled with obstacles and adversaries. Yet, through it all, he stood staunchly to protect the flickering light of Torah, even if it meant committing his life to never-ending war. Compromise did not exist; he never gave in to the principal that cost him dearly.

His was a voice and conscience that could not be silenced. And in the end many of his opponents turned into admirers and loyal friends. His impact on a wide stratum of Soviet Jewry will never be fully gauged. ■