



לע"נ  
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 בן אלתר שלמה זלמן ע"ה  
 סירלניק  
 נלב"ע ו' תמוז ה'תשס"ג  
 תנ"צ'ב'ה'  
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 הרה"ת ר' חיים יהודה ויוכבד צירל  
 ומשפחתם שיחיו  
 בוארסקי



# True Stories

*We present excerpts of a number of letters from the Rebbe to Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin, author of "Sippurei Chassidim" (published in English as "A Treasury of Chassidic Tales") regarding ensuring the veracity and truthfulness of stories.*





I enjoy the fact that your *sefarim* of *Chassidische* stories are being printed, and certainly you will note the sources of the stories, who the storyteller is and the extent of that person's accuracy in telling it (and of course, if the stories are *Chassidische* stories), or whether the story is merely based on the subject's character [creative non-fiction]...<sup>1</sup>



With gratitude I have received your book "*Sippurei Chassidim*." As is my custom, I relied upon the saying of Chazal of "Do I not know that what I say is good?"<sup>2</sup> and I made a number of annotations in the margins, with my apologies [in advance].

You certainly received my response to your previous letter, and I await to receive positive notifications regarding what is written there.

Respectfully and with blessing,  
*The Rebbe's signature*

P.S. **General notes:**

1) In our confused generation, the more that things can be clarified and made precise, the more it helps. Even if the necessity for this isn't immediately obvious, it is possible that elsewhere, in the near future it will eventually be clearly proven. This also applies to someone who compiles stories about *nesiei Yisroel* from all times and places—you should note, either in the margins or at least at the end of the book, the source of each story, and more importantly, the reliability of the source. If this is true of all *nesiei Yisroel*, all the more so is it true of the *nesi'im* of the Chassidic movement; for information that is not precise, and sometimes falsified for nefarious purposes, has caused much damage to the spreading of *Toras haChassidus* and the ability of its ways and *minhagim* to reach to a wider audience.

It is apparent from the last lines of the *sefer*, and in general, from the two pages of source references, and knowing your love for order, that you certainly have a list of the source of each and every story that is in your *sefer*. It would be fitting to publish—at least now—source references for each story in a separate booklet, which will

significantly correct the above, if not completely. It would be best if you could include a few lines about the reliability of the various collections of stories and storytellers. As is known, there are two extremes: Those who are extremely reliable and the opposite, and most people are somewhere in between.

Obviously, one may publish a collection of stories like yours even if the reliability of the stories is unknown, because in any case, it showcases the spirit [i.e. culture and character] of the Chassidim or their descendants. As the saying goes, "Even if the story isn't true, it could have been true." But as a result of your standing as a member of *anash*, it is near-certain that your stories will be relied upon as if they had been examined and found to be reliable, especially if they're printed in a *sefer*. Therefore clear information is needed [regarding your sources].

2) In continuation to the above: In general, there are stories of Chassidim that cause confusion, and some of those who hear the stories will conclude that the protagonist did something contrary to *halacha*, or at least contrary to observance beyond the letter of the law. This can affect their general attitude toward subjects of Chassidus and to the study of Chassidus itself. However, with a nuanced change in some of the story's terminology, all the confusion could have been removed. Since the vast majority of the stories have passed through many pipelines, the terminology is certainly not precise [and thus, there is no need to keep it exactly as is]. This is especially true when translating from one language to another.

I will cite two examples:

1) **Story #301, beginning on p. 309.** This story contradicts the entire concept of *maggidim* [travelling preachers]. As a result, many will come to the conclusion that those who employed *maggidim* and the like did not put their hearts to it and did not want to perfect themselves or work hard on learning Torah.

The truth is that this bothered me for a while too, until I heard a story from my father-in-law, the Rebbe, in the name of the Tzemach Tzedek, who said that in his youth, the



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Alter Rebbe wanted to give him a gift of Torah knowledge. According to the story, he replied that Torah must come through hard work, and therefore, he wished to learn on his own and put in the effort. But in time, he regretted that he did not accept the gift, because he could have worked and deepened his knowledge of Torah even after he acquired what would have been given to him as a gift, for Torah is “Longer than the earth is its measure,” and he would have had both things in hand: broader knowledge and effort in learning Torah.<sup>3</sup>

2) **Story #313:** Which relates that Reb Meshulam Zusha instructed that a grave be dug up and searched—an instruction that is difficult to justify according to Shulchan Aruch. But that would not be the case, if a small change would be made—that what is being discussed is not specifically a grave, but the area around it; the immediate surroundings—that would remove all of the confusion. Certainly, as the story was passed down, [the storytellers] weren’t specific in saying that it was the actual grave—as one who reads the *sefer* will understand.

By the way, this story mentions that this matter is clearly mentioned in Talmud Yerushalmi, and I’d be interested in knowing if you know the source for that. Thank you in advance.<sup>4</sup>



... Regarding what you wrote about my notes<sup>5</sup> on your stories, I agree with you; as Chazal tell us, it is a mitzvah

to uphold the words of our sages, especially the *nesi'im*. But that applies only if it is at least likely that the words were passed down with precision. But in a case where the accuracy is highly doubtful—because these words were passed down from one storyteller to the next and from one person to the next, and it is **impossible** that there aren’t any changes in the wording, particularly in details that people aren’t so interested in—instead of asking and searching for difficult explanations, it is more logical to say that a word or two is not accurate, and then the question vanishes ...<sup>6</sup>

1. Igros Kodesh vol. 11 letter #3405.

2. See Bava Metzia 84a. Rabbi Eliezer ben Pedas would say to Rabbi Yochanan, “There is a *braisa* that supports your opinion” after each teaching of Rabbi Yochanan. Rabbi Yochanan responded, “Do I not know that what I say is good?” Instead, Rabbi Yochanan wanted him to raise objections to his statements, resulting in the clarifying of the *halacha*.

In the context of this letter, the Rebbe explains to Rabbi Zevin why the Rebbe has chosen to make annotations on his *sefer*, as these corrections would serve a purpose.

3. And so those who relied on *maggidim* could still very well be placing as much effort in their learning as others did, working beyond that which they gained from the *maggidim*—not relying on them as a substitute for hard work in learning.

4. Ibid. letter #3657.

5. See previous letter.

6. Ibid. letter #3731.