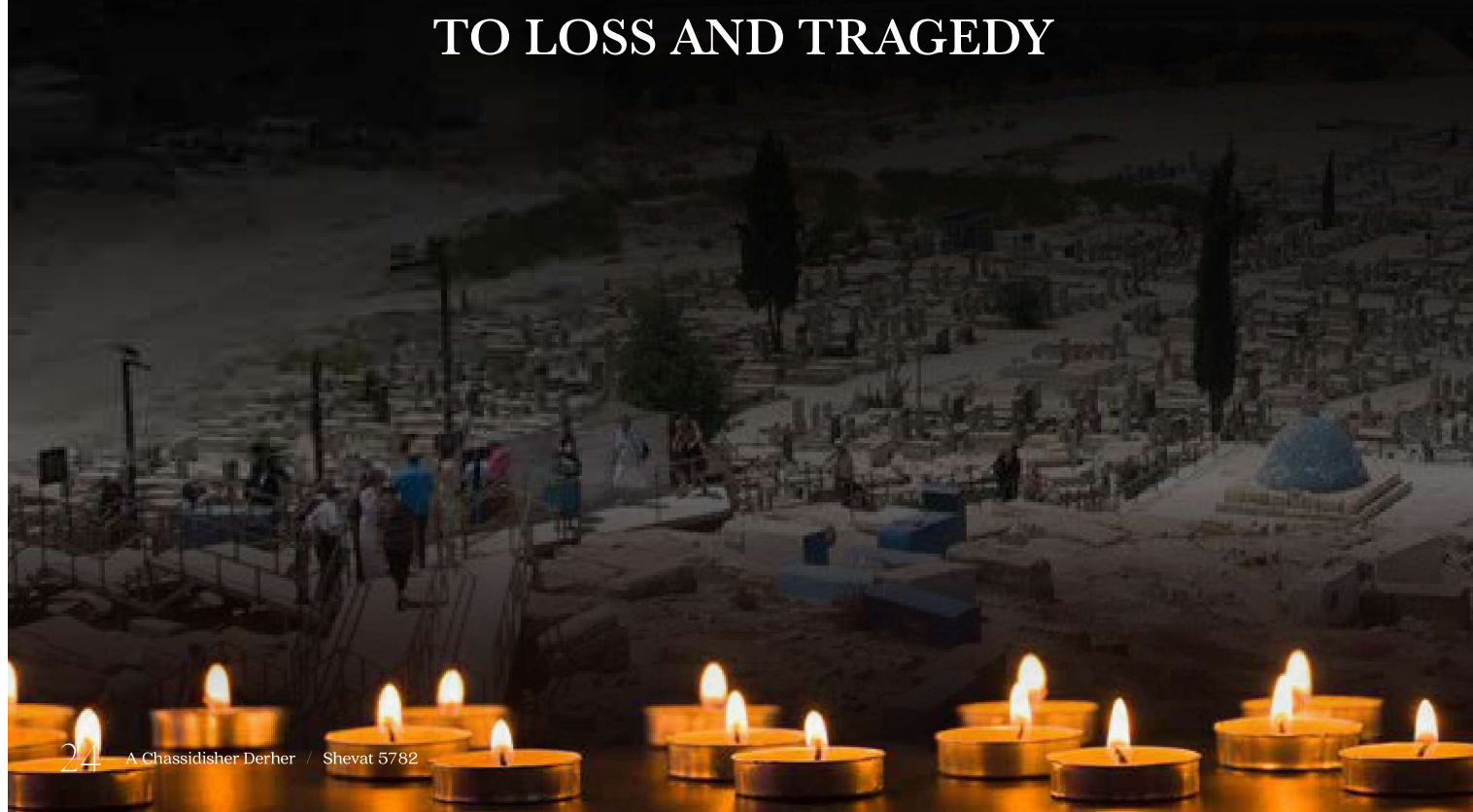


# FILLING THE VOID

THE REBBE'S RESPONSE  
TO LOSS AND TRAGEDY



לזכות  
הרה"ת ר' לוי וזוגתו מרת מנוחה מינדל  
ומשפחתם שיחיו לברטוב

למזל טוב לנסיעתם ולהצלחה רבה  
בשליחותם הק' באוסטין, טעקסאס

נדפס ע"י  
משפחת פלדמן  
פלארידא, טעקסאס.



**H**undreds of people remember their personal encounters with the Rebbe while they were grieving or suffering from challenging life-issues. More than advice they received, what is etched in their hearts and minds is the fatherly care and concern they received from the Rebbe. As the רועה נאמן of our generation, the Rebbe concerns himself with the wellbeing of each and every Yid, both spiritually and materially, as if he were his only child. Thus, their trouble is truly the Rebbe's trouble. Whatever it may be that a Chossid is going through, the Rebbe is there with him.

There is a famous line the Frierdiker Rebbe once wrote in a letter: "א יתום קלאגט, א קינד וויינט" (an orphan grieves; a child cries). An orphan is left without anyone to turn to, leaving him no other alternative than grieving helplessly about his painful situation. A child on the other hand, has a father to turn to, so he cries to his father for help.

This notion is most profoundly brought out by the way our Rebbe attentively showed his concern for those suffering the loss of a loved one. Whether through encouragement in *yechidus* or in a letter of *nichum aveilim* the Rebbe wrote, as well as the close attention the Rebbe would regularly show *yesomim*.

The following article is a collection of letters, anecdotes, and personal stories, which illustrate the Rebbe's unique approach to dealing with losses, rooted in his deep concern for every Yid, whatever it may be that they are going through.

## You Are Not Alone

Shortly after the Six Day War, the home of Ariel Sharon was struck with tragedy. Sharon's 11 year old son Gur was killed in a tragic accident. While he was mourning



ARIEL SHARON WITH HIS SON GUR.

the sudden loss of his son, he received a unique letter from the Rebbe in which the Rebbe explained the *nusach* one wishes a mourner:

"...An element of comfort—or, more than just an element—is expressed in the ritual *nusach*, repeated by generations of Torah and tradition



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among our people: המקום ינחם אתכם בתוך שאר אבלי ציון וירושלים (May Hashem comfort you among the mourners of Tzion and Yerushalayim).

"At first glance, the connection between the mourner to whom this *bracha* is directed and the mourners of Yerushalayim's destruction appears to be quite puzzling. In truth, however, they are connected. For the main consolation embodied by this phrase is in its inner content, namely: The grief over Tziyon and Yerushalayim is common to all Yidden, wherever they may be... Similarly, the grief of an individual Yid or *Yiddishe* family is shared by the entire nation...

"Another point and principle, expressed by double consolation, is that just as Hashem will most certainly rebuild the ruins of Tziyon and Yerushalayim and gather the dispersed of Israel from the ends of the earth through Moshiach Tzidkeinu, He will also, without a doubt, remove the grief of the individual, fulfilling the promise הקיצו ורגנו שוכני עפר—the dwellers of the dust shall rise and sing. Great will be the joy, the true joy, when all will be reunited at the time of *techiyas hameisim*.

"There is yet a third point: In regard to Tziyon and Yerushalayim, the Romans—and before them, the Babylonians—were given dominion only over the wood, stone, silver, and gold of the *Beis Hamikdash's* physical manifestation, but not over its inner spiritual essence, contained within the heart of each and every Yid; for the nations have no dominion over this and it stands eternally. So too, regarding the mourning of the individual, death dominates only the physical body and concerns of the





JEM 983IT, VIA CHAIM BARUCH HALBERSTAM (12 ADAR 5752)

THE REBBE HANDS A DOLLAR TO THE HUSBAND OF MRS. PESHA LEAH LAPINE AND HER CHILDREN, ONE WEEK AFTER HER TRAGIC MURDER.

person who passed. The *neshamah*, however, is eternal; it has merely ascended to *Olam Ha'emes*. That is why any good deed [performed by the mourner] that accords with the will of He who gives life, *Hashem Yisbarech*, adds to the *neshamah's* delight and merit, and to its general good.”<sup>1</sup>

One of the most difficult feelings a person can have is when he feels that he is alone in his misery, for an outsider cannot possibly relate to the depth of one's personal loss. With the first point in the letter, the Rebbe made it clear that as lonely as one may feel during a time of loss, he must remember that a Yid is never truly lonely.

Those who would seek the Rebbe's counseling, more than anything else, what they received from the Rebbe was the sense that being at the Rebbe's side, they were not alone, in a very tangible way.

The Rebbe would very often find opportunities to comfort mourners also by giving them special attention. For example: On the Shabbos following the murder of Mrs. Pesha Leah Lapine, her children stood near the Rebbe throughout the farbrengen. The Rebbe poured wine from his *becher* to each of them, and then to their father, saying ברכה והצלחה, ומחה ה' דמעה מעל כל פנים בגאולה האמיתית והשלמה. Then he specifically encouraged them during the singing.

## The Eternity of the Neshamah

One of the most painful aspects of losing a loved one, if not the most painful aspect, is the loss itself. The person who one was close with and loved is no longer here and we are left with a feeling of emptiness. The Rebbe's clear view on the eternal life of the *neshamah* would serve as a reminder that a deceased person is never 'gone' for the *neshamah* lives on forever.

This is perhaps the most fundamental principle the Rebbe would repeat time and again to people grieving the loss of a loved one. In numerous letters, and *yechidusen* the Rebbe spoke of this idea with various implications, depending on the situation.

To one heart-broken individual, for whom it was very difficult to get back to himself and as a result was not capable of focusing on his Torah study, the Rebbe explained that the notion of the *neshamah's* eternal life is the reason the Torah prohibits mourning and dwelling in sorrow for more than the allotted time frame in Shulchan Aruch.

In the letter the Rebbe wrote to him, the Rebbe illustrated that these feelings of dejection are certainly coming from the *yetzer hara* who, as usual, looks for each and every opportunity to distract one from his divine service. Says the Rebbe, “If you follow the advice of the *yetzer hara* this will cause grief to the *neshamah* of your loved one, for she is being abused by the *yetzer hara* for the purpose of weakening someone's Torah study. Therefore, on the contrary, you must study Torah with diligence for this will be a source of *koras ruach* (gratification) for the *neshamah* of your loved one, and the vessel through which to draw down Hashem's blessings for the entire family.”<sup>2</sup>

Following the horrific tragedy at the Beit Sefer L'melacha of Kfar Chabad in 5716<sup>3\*</sup> where four students along with their teacher Hatomim Simcha

“...Death dominates only the physical body and concerns of the person who passed. The *neshamah*, however, is eternal.”

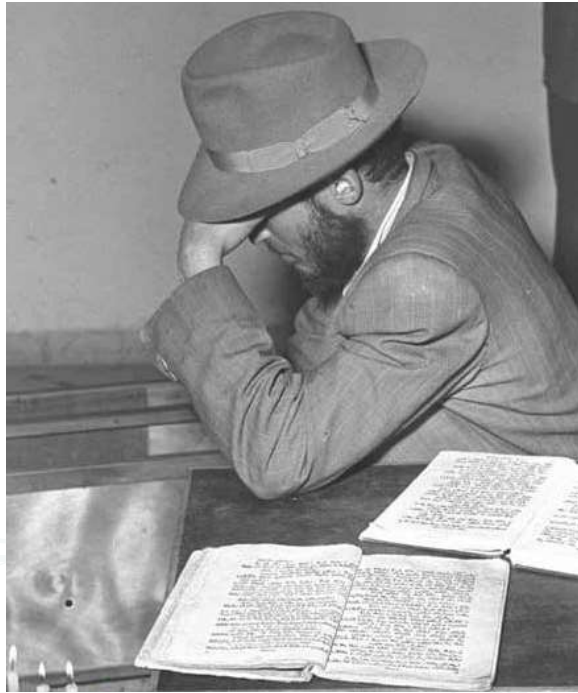
Zilberstrom were murdered by terrorists, the Rebbe instructed the founding of ‘*Yad Hachamisha*’ in memory of the five whose lives were brutally taken.

Shortly after the groundbreaking for the new building of *Yad Hachamisha*, the Rebbe wrote a letter to Simcha's mother. The letter starts with this notion: “All Yidden are believers in the idea that a person is mainly his *neshamah*, his *חלק אלקה ממעל ממש*, which lives on eternally.” The Rebbe then translates this idea to mean that one can ‘win over death’ so to speak:

“Since the purpose of man's creation is to affect this material world, therefore, when the *neshamah* is connected to an accomplishment in this world, especially something that will perpetually bear fruit (education of further generations), this is victory over his death (for he is continuing to fulfill the purpose for which he was created, to impact this world). Additionally, this causes the

\*📅 5716-1956





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MEIR FRIEDMAN, ONE OF THE TEACHERS AT BEIT SEFER L'MELACHA WHO PLAYED A ROLE IN SAVING CHILDREN DURING THE ATTACK, MOURNS THE DEATHS AT THE SITE THE NEXT DAY. MEMORIAL CANDLES CAN BE SEEN AT THE BOTTOM LEFT.

greatest *koras ruach* (gratification) to the *neshamah*.”<sup>4</sup>

With this point, the Rebbe also addresses the painful question a mourner may ask: Indeed the *neshamah* is eternal, yet for us living in this world, a dear and beloved person has been removed from our lives. How does one deal with the reality in this world where the connection that was shared with this person is no longer?

“How would I feel if my son went overseas and was living in a foreign country where he could not communicate with me; but, I could be assured that all his needs were being met...”

In a lengthy letter, the Rebbe poses a question. The Shulchan Aruch tells us<sup>5</sup> two seemingly contradictory *dinim*: “One should not mourn more than is appropriate...” and “One who does not mourn as instructed by our sages, is considered cruel.” If mourning is natural, what can be wrong with mourning extra? And if it is wrong, then why is someone who mourns less considered cruel?

The Rebbe explains that when someone passes away, two things take place simultaneously: On the one hand,

the *neshamah* transcends the limitations imposed on it by the body. At the same time, however, the person’s material presence is lacking, leaving his loved ones with a great void. These are the reasons for the above mentioned *dinim*. The purpose of *aveilus* according to *halacha* is to bring about *teshuvah*, thus maintaining the connection between the *neshamah* and those close to it in this world, for it sees what’s doing with them and derives *nachas ruach* from their good actions.<sup>6</sup>

On one occasion, a mother who lost a child at a tender age wrote a letter to the Rebbe seeking advice with regards to her older son who had become despondent after his brother’s passing. The Rebbe’s response to her was: “...You should explain to him that doing things that will benefit Yiddishe children would bring *nachas ruach* to the *neshamah* of his brother...The *neshamah* is waiting for those who care for its satisfaction to do something for its benefit and *aliyas haneshamah*...”<sup>7</sup>

Reb Nachum Rabinowitz related what he heard from someone who went into *yechidus* after losing an only child. The man related:

“At that point, I felt that my life no longer had any purpose. I saw no value in my wealth and status. I went to see the Rebbe in search of consolation and advice. The Rebbe asked me how I would feel if my son went overseas and was living in a foreign country where he could not communicate with me; but, I could be assured that all his needs were being met and that he wasn’t suffering at all. I answered that, although the separation would be difficult to bear, I would be happy for my son.

“The Rebbe then continued: ‘And although he could not respond, if you could communicate to him and send him packages, would you do so?’

“‘Of course,’ I answered. ‘This is precisely your present situation,’ the Rebbe concluded. ‘With every prayer you recite, you are sending a message to your son. And with every gift you make to tzedakah or institution you fund, you are sending a “package” to him. He cannot respond, but he appreciates your words and your gifts.’”

On a similar note, Rabbi Mordechai Sufrin of London, related: “In 5732\*, my wife gave birth to our son, the seventh of our children, who tragically passed away only nine weeks later. Seeking encouragement and inspiration, we decided we would travel to New York to have a *yechidus* with the Rebbe.

“We came to the Rebbe before Purim. In the middle of the Purim farbrengen the Rebbe exclaimed, ‘Is Sufrin from London here?’ I immediately went up to the Rebbe’s place, and he gave me a bottle of *mashke* to say *l’chaim*, and told me to share some of it while I was in New York, and also to others in Paris and London. Then he gave me



THE REBBE ATTENDING THE HAKAMAS HAMATZEIVA OF RASHAG. 14 ADAR I, 5749\*.

a *bracha*, 'From now on you will have only good news.'

"During the *yechidus* we had with the Rebbe, he talked to us about our deceased baby. Among other things, I remember the Rebbe telling us, 'Although you certainly are frustrated that you can no longer see him, you must remember that he can see you.'"

## Bringing Nachas to the Neshamah

At the farbrengen of Chof Av 5742\*, the Rebbe began:

"When it comes to a *yahrtzeit*, we remember the *neshamah* of the deceased in *Olam Ha'emes*, who has come to understand the greatness of what can only be accomplished in this material world. Concerning the study of Torah, we are told 'Torah is not in the Heavens.' The Alter Rebbe explains this to mean that any development or resolution of a Torah impasse, or a *psak din*, can only be accomplished by a Yid who is alive here below. Likewise, in regards to mitzvos, they cannot be performed in *Olam Ha'emes*...

"From this it is understood that after passing, the *neshamah* of the deceased finds itself in a state where it requires the actions of those in this world, who have an opportunity to act on behalf of the *neshamah* to perform these physical mitzvos, through their physical limbs and organs... on its behalf, and in its merit..."<sup>8</sup>

In a letter the Rebbe wrote: "Surely you know what is brought down in *sefarim* regarding the manner through which children can cause gratification to the *neshamos* of

their deceased fathers. One of the main ways is through the spreading of Torah and mitzvos, especially keeping in mind how much your father devoted his life for matters of Chassidus in general and spreading its teachings in particular. Therefore I hope that you are active in this area,

### HOW TO EXPLAIN A LOSS TO YOUNG CHILDREN?

"In response to your question whether or not you should reveal to your children about the passing of their mother. In my opinion, you should slowly explain to them that Hashem has brought her to a place in which there is no illness. This place is in Heaven, from where she can give to her children, as well as she can beseech Hashem that her children be successful in their learning and behavior. Her motherly compassion for her children is intact, and she yearns for them to behave in the proper manner, through which they cause her much *nachas ruach*, in which state she can see to it that they be successful in their endeavors. The only thing that has changed, is that now we cannot see this with our physical eyes.

"Obviously, the language you will use to explain this to your older children is not necessarily appropriate for the younger ones, however the general concept can be explained to all children."





JEM 108056 (4 SHEVAT 5733)

and particularly during the year of mourning, for your merit (and responsibility) is several times greater, since you are in a position through which you can affect a particular circle, and nothing can stand in the way of one's will."<sup>9</sup>

In another letter the Rebbe wrote: "...to see to it that all children of the one who passed away should follow the path of Torah and mitzvos on a daily basis... Understandably, **this** is of utmost importance, not only for them, but for their deceased father too—this is of much greater importance than eulogies that are to be printed or delivered in a speech..."<sup>10</sup>

To the son of a famed *talmid chacham* the Rebbe wrote: "If there are any Torah innovations from your father, make the effort to publish them, for the *nachas* this will cause his *neshamah*, needs no explanation."<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, to the family of Rabbi Mendel Kasher, author of the compilation '*Torah Shleimah*' the Rebbe wrote: "Ostensibly one can be sure, that continuing his main work—the Torah Shleimah—and completing it as soon as possible, would be the greatest respect to him, and [would bring about an] *aliyas haneshamah* higher and higher."<sup>12</sup>

## No Explanations!

Following the tragedy at Beit Sefer L'melacha (see above), the Rebbe spoke about the tragedy with great pain and anguish on numerous occasions.

At one instance, the Rebbe spoke of some who had tried to give their own interpretation of what had happened, borrowing the notion of 'בקרובי אקדש' (Hashem's name is sanctified through the passing of those close to him), which Hashem said regarding the

untimely passing of Aharon Hakohen's two sons.

"In truth," said the Rebbe, "this is no explanation... The notion itself is not understood [the fact that Hashem's name is sanctified by the passing of *tzaddikim* is beyond our rationale]. Thus, what do you gain by explaining something not understood with another idea that is not understood?! Therefore, this is *tanchumin shel hevel*—condolences of vanity. Rather: **Va'yidom Aharon**—Aharon remained silent.

"Obviously, we are not permitted to question Hashem's actions, but that doesn't mean we understand what happened. To this day I have not found any explanation for this tragedy..."

"[When Moshiach comes] we will offer thanks to Hashem for all of our suffering in *galus*, and only then will we comprehend how this was indeed revealed good."

## Preparing for Life's Challenges

Mr. Yaakov Shiffman related:

"In 5733\* my father was diagnosed with colon cancer. Two years later, his health began seriously deteriorating. At one point, we went to the hospital where the doctors examined him and saw that there wasn't much they could do..."

"Of course, we didn't want to give up. One cousin told us, 'You should go to see the Lubavitcher Rebbe.'

"It was the first week of Kislev. My sister and I went along with our father and mother to a *yechidus* with the Rebbe. We entered the Rebbe's room, I stood in the back while my father spoke quietly with the



Rebbe for a few minutes. When the Rebbe finished speaking with my father we began to leave, but suddenly the Rebbe said to me, ‘You stay.’

“I was already anxious about everything that was going on with my father. I was only 16 years old at the time, and I got very, very nervous. Then, the Rebbe said to me, ‘*kum*’ (come over), gesturing that I should approach. He went over to his shelf and pulled out two volumes of *Maseches Brachos*, and said to me: ‘By the laws of nature, your father is extremely sick now, he’s near the end. Hashem will help, but your father will be depressed, and you’re going to be depressed. You will need something to give you strength. I want to teach you something which will help keep you going.’

“The Rebbe opened the Gemara to *daf yud* and began to teach me the story from *Melachim Beis* which the Gemara discusses there. King Chizkiyahu was ill, and the *navi* Yeshaya visited him. The *navi* told the king that his days are numbered and he should prepare for the end, but Chizkiyahu refused to accept this, saying ‘No, I have faith in Hashem.’ Although the *navi* said it was too late, Chizkiyahu began to *daven*, for no matter what, a Yid doesn’t give up hope.

“I was standing across the Rebbe’s desk and he was sitting. But in the middle of the story, the Rebbe motioned for me to come around the desk, and I looked into the Gemara together with him. He translated the dialogue slowly into Yiddish, one word at a time, pointing to the place, like a father teaching his son. The loving way the Rebbe looked at me stands out in my mind—I never saw that type of love. He gave us his *bracha*, but then he gave much more. He saw that this boy needed fatherly love, and he gave it.

“I remember the Rebbe pointing to the words with his finger, then looking at me and pointing again. He had me repeat it until it was clear that I understood. The Rebbe wanted to make sure that I understood the Gemara’s idea well, and that I could explain it to my father too: That even at death’s door you should never give up hope, you should never become depressed, and you should accept Hashem’s will.

“This all took quite some time, about 25 minutes. When I came out of the Rebbe’s room, I was sweating. As we drove home, I told my father what had happened, and he broke down and cried. As soon as we got home, we learned that Gemara three or four times.

“Two and a half months after our *yechidus* with the Rebbe, my father passed away. After he passed away, I was on the verge of becoming despondent. I didn’t have relatives to look after me: My mother was an only child, my father’s whole family had been



THE REBBE LOOKS ON AS A YOUNG BOY RECITES KADDISH FOR HIS FATHER, SHORTLY AFTER HIS PASSING.

wiped out in the war, and I was only 16 years old.

“I don’t know how to thank the Rebbe for this, but he sat me down and told me the facts of life. Everyone else had been telling me, ‘No, it will be good, it will be good.’ The Rebbe looked at me and told me how to be prepared for it.

“Over the following years, I had times when things got tough. I left yeshiva for a while and wandered away. But then I remembered what the Rebbe taught me. Throughout those years, I probably learned that piece of Gemara thirty times, and it got me back on track. The fact that I am today who I am and that I raised a beautiful family is because of that night when the Rebbe lovingly spent so much time with me.” ❶

1. Igros Kodesh, vol. 25 p. 3.
2. Likkutei Sichos vol. 35 p. 334.
3. See Derher, Sivan 5774.
4. Ibid. p. 339.
5. Yoreh De’ah Siman 394.
6. Likkutei Sichos vol. 35 p. 332.
7. Ibid. p. 336.
8. Toras Menachem Hisvaaduyos 5742, vol. 4 p. 2012.
9. Likkutei Sichos vol. 35 p. 340.
10. Ibid. 339.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid. p. 342.

JEM 234913, VIA LEVI FREIDIN (17 TISHREI 5750)