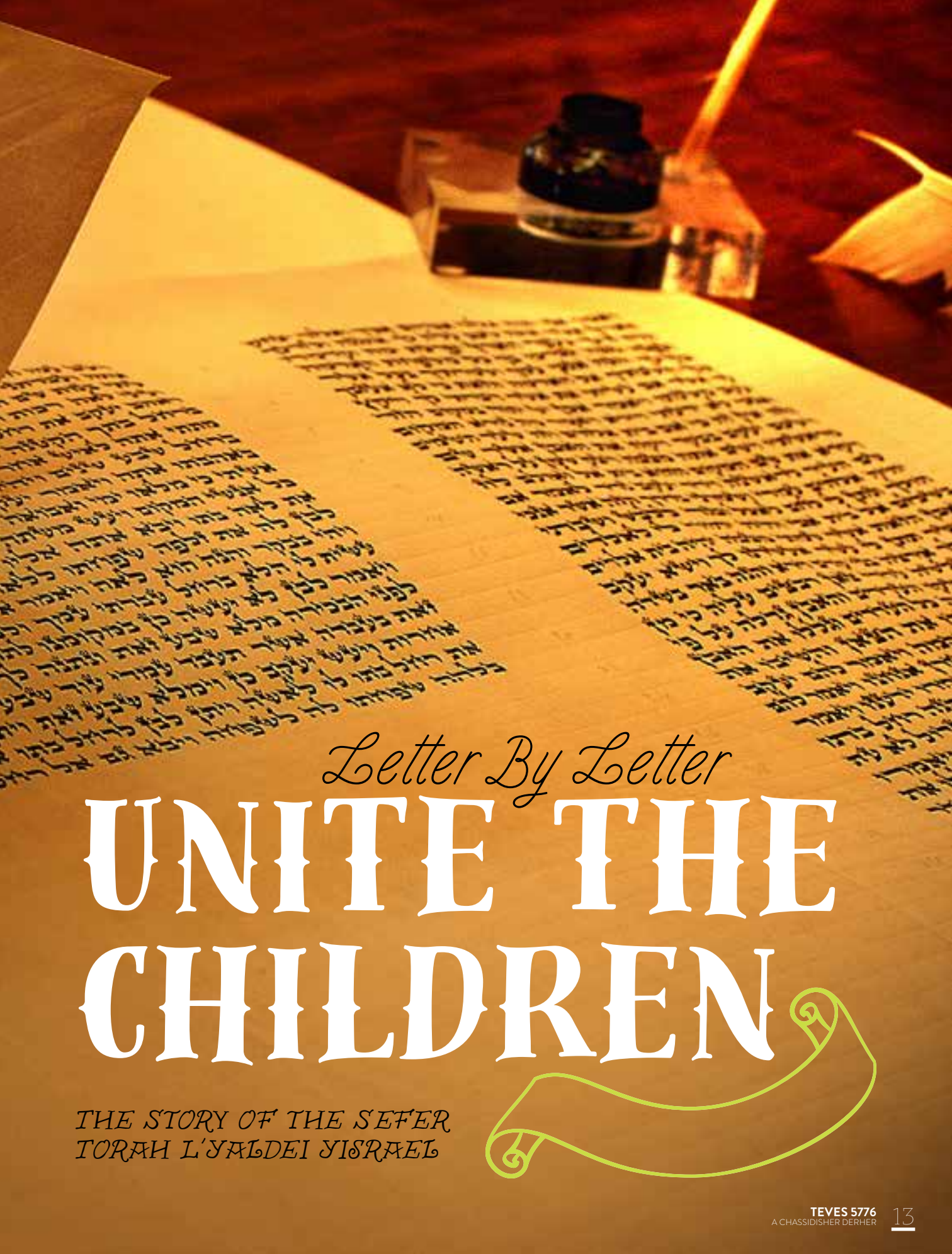




In the preparation of this article we were greatly assisted by **Rabbi Shmuel Greisman**, director of the Sefer Torah L'Yaldei Yisroel, and the album "Ois B'Sefer Torah".

Photos: Children's Sefer Torah; JEM/The Living Archive



Letter By Letter

UNITE THE CHILDREN

THE STORY OF THE SEFER TORAH L'YALDEI YISRAEL



THE FIRST THREE DAYS

Tuesday, evening of 11 Nissan

Yud-Alef Nissan 5741 was one of those farbrengens. The atmosphere was capable of sweeping you away from this world and transporting you to a higher place. But at the same time, there was hyper-awareness of reality. One of the topics of the farbrengen was the recent attempted murder of President Ronald Reagan, which had left America traumatized and desperately seeking answers. After giving the president his personal *brocha* for a speedy recovery, the Rebbe spoke at length about the lessons that must be learned by the United States as a country, the president as it's leader, and by Yidden as well.

Then the Rebbe said a *maamar*, after which came a *sicha* about the *mitvzoim* and specifically *mitvza Pesach*. Towards the end of that *sicha*, the Rebbe suddenly made an announcement¹:

“We spoke earlier about *ma'alin bakodesh*, growing in holiness. Therefore, after a pause for saying *l'chaim* with *simcha*, *t'rua* and *kol gadol*, we will pick up [the farbrengen] and discuss a new idea.” Smiling, the Rebbe continued, “Not a new *gezaira*, *chas v'sholom*, rather a proposal and plea. As will be explained soon, *umitoch simcha vetuv leivov! L'chaim!*”

The assembled crowd was shocked. When was the last time the Rebbe had made such a dramatic announcement? What could the Rebbe have in mind?

After a short pause, The Rebbe's father's *hakafo*s *niggun* was started, and the Rebbe led the fiery singing, repeating the middle stanza over and over. The nervous anticipation grew by the minute.

The Rebbe began the next *sicha* by prefacing that, for the past few



months, he had constantly been speaking “with a *shturem*” about Tzivos Hashem (established earlier that year), uniting all Jewish children throughout the world under a common banner—Tzivos Hashem—and a common goal—to spread Yiddishkeit in their homes, their surroundings, and beyond.

However, the Rebbe said, children live in a physical world where it is difficult to feel this unity. Moreover, there are some Jewish children who may not know about it altogether. For this reason, he continued, other

ideas were proposed to make them feel united; a common uniform, a common symbol, and other similar ideas.

True unity, though, is achieved through Torah. Therefore, the Rebbe announced, we are now proposing an utterly novel *mitvza*: to write a *sefer Torah* written solely for children, boys and girls, before bar and bas mitvva; each child getting their own letter. This will demonstrate to the child in a real, physical way that he is connected to all other Jewish children; and through the Torah.



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In order to highlight this idea of unity, the Rebbe said that the Torah should be written in Eretz Yisroel, the one and only Yiddishe land. And more specifically, in *Yerushalayim ir hakodesh*, a city that belongs to all Yidden together, uniting them all as one - as the *possuk* says, "עיר שחבורה לה" "יחדיו".

In order to avoid *nahama diksufa* (meaning that something received for free is not as cherished as something one paid for), each child will pay one U.S. dollar, or its equivalent in foreign currencies, for the letter. The Rebbe

THE REBBE'S HAGAHOS ON A PRESS RELEASE ANNOUNCING THE NEW SEFER TORAH FOLLOWING THE FARBRENGEN OF YUD ALEPH NISSAN 5741.

appointed the Beis Din Rabbanei Chabad in Eretz Yisroel—"my representatives"—to oversee the writing of the Torah and to work out the halachic details. The main thing, the Rebbe said, is that the Torah should be written with the highest level of *kashrus*, and even more importantly—it should be written as fast as possible.



Wednesday, 11 Nissan

In Eretz Yisroel, where they were listening to the farbrengen via live hook-up, it was already daytime. The farbrengen had begun at 9:30 pm Eastern time, which was 3:30 am in Eretz Yisroel. By the time this *sicha* was said, it was 12:30 am in New York, which meant that it was 6:30 am in Eretz Yisroel. The Beis Din

Rabbanei Chabad immediately called an emergency meeting in the Colel Chabad offices in Yerushalayim for that very day. Despite the short notice, and with the rabbanim living all over Eretz Yisroel, every single one of them made it over to Yerushalayim.

The task before them wasn't a simple one: writing a Torah, especially a nice one, is an intense project involving many details, which usually takes months of preparation. But they didn't have time for extensive planning; as the Rebbe said, it had to happen as fast as possible.

During the meeting, the rabbanim chose Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Henig as *sofer*, and they decided that the Torah would be in the Alter Rebbe's *ksav*. As soon as the decision was made, not a moment was wasted. They called Rabbi Henig over to the office and *right on the spot* he began writing the *sefer Torah*. The project that the Rebbe had launched just hours ago was already underway!

When the Chassidim from all over Eretz Yisroel gathered for the yearly Yud-Alef Nissan farbrengen the following evening in Kfar Chabad,

under the fresh impression of the Rebbe's powerful words about the new *mitvza*, Rabbi Mordechai Ashkenazi shared the thrilling news—the writing had begun!

Back in New York, Yud-Alef Nissan was unfolding pretty much like every year. The Rebbe went to the Ohel; after which he returned to 770, davened *mincha*; and then a group of elder Chassidim delivered a special birthday *brocha*.

Suddenly, Rabbi Groner came out of the Rebbe's room looking for Rabbi Hodakov. Rabbi Hodakov went into the Rebbe's room and emerged with surprising news—there would be another farbrengen!

This caught everyone off guard, since there had already been a farbrengen for Yud-Alef Nissan the previous night. It was so out of ordinary that many of the guests that had come to New York for Yud-Alef Nissan had already returned home to prepare for Pesach. The crowd at the farbrengen was quite small, but the excitement was palpable, as the Chassidim waited to see what would happen.

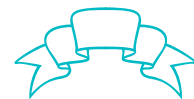
"First of all, we open with good news," the Rebbe began². "Yesterday we spoke about writing a *sefer Torah* for Jewish children... Today the news arrived that the writing of the first *sefer Torah* has already begun, on Yud-Alef Nissan. The first line was already



LEADING RABANIM OF ERETZ YISROEL MEET IN BEIS SHAZAR IN Kfar CHABAD ON 18 NISSAN 5741, TO DISCUSS HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE REBBE'S NEW MITVZA.



CHILDREN SURROUND THE SOFER, RABBI SHLOMO AHARON HENIG AS THE FIRST SHEET OF PARCHMENT IS WRITTEN.



THEY CALLED RABBI HENIG OVER TO THE OFFICE AND RIGHT ON THE SPOT HE BEGAN WRITING THE SEFER TORAH.



RABBI SHMUEL GREISMAN STANDS NEAR A MAP IN HIS OFFICE, TALLYING THE NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS FROM AROUND THE WORLD.

JEM/THE LIVING ARCHIVE

written on a beautiful, high quality parchment.”

The first part of the *sicha* involved the spiritual significance of writing a *sefer Torah*, and then the Rebbe turned to the practical aspects, giving many practical guidelines about the new *mitvza*: how to pick a letter for each child; how to design the certificates; and more.

Thursday, 15 Nissan

The following day, people throughout the world who had heard the Rebbe’s urgent instructions at the farbrengen, were clamoring to buy letters for their children. However, there was a bit of a problem: no one really knew how to go about it, since the *mitvza* hadn’t been officially set up yet. And so, in every community, one person was designated to collect the forms and hold on to the money until they knew what the next step would

be. (The Rebbe would clarify this a few days later, see below.)

That day, the Rebbe again went to the Ohel, and after *mincha* it was announced that there would be yet another farbrengen! Three farbrengens in a row! Although this farbrengen wasn’t a total surprise, since it was Yud-Gimmel Nissan, the Tzemach Tzedek’s *yahrtzeit*, it was still an unprecedented phenomenon.

The shul downstairs had been cleaned for Pesach by now, and the *gabbaim* warned everyone not to bring in *chametz*; in fact, even the ‘*mezonos*’ on the Rebbe’s table were kosher for Pesach. At 9:30 pm Eastern time the farbrengen began.

The first half of the farbrengen was focussed on the *yahrtzeit* of the Tzemach Tzedek, but in the *sichos* following the *maamar*, the Rebbe spoke at length about the new *mitvza*. The Rebbe said that they should make

sure that the writing of the Torah continues on the following day—Friday—so that there would be a full three days, a *chazaka*, of writing before the sofer is forced to break for Pesach. Thus concluded three whirlwind days of farbrengens, inspiration and excitement—and now it was time to get to work.

SETTING IT UP

After witnessing the Rebbe’s urgency for the project, Lubavitcher Chassidim worldwide rolled up their sleeves. Enrollment forms were immediately printed and sent around the world, and as the days went by, more and more people signed up.

The official coordination of the *mitvza* was put in the hands of the Beis Din (who were later instructed that the *mitvza* should not be associated with any other Chabad *mosad*), and they subsequently set up



THE ORIGINAL CERTIFICATE (RIGHT) CONFIRMING THE CHILD'S LETTER IN THE TORAH, DESIGNED PER THE REBBE'S DETAILED INSTRUCTIONS. (LEFT) THE CURRENT VERSION OF THE SAME CERTIFICATE.

the *Vaad L'ksivas Sefer Hatorah Shel Yaldei Yisrael*, asking Rabbi Shmuel Greisman to take charge.

The Beis Din called a meeting of rabbanim and *askanim* in Beis Shazar in Kfar Chabad to discuss how the *mitvza* should be coordinated in the smoothest and quickest way possible. They decided on the basic parameters of the outreach effort, and a few people were assigned to assist Rabbi Greisman in the activities, each taking on different responsibilities; publicity, outreach, finances, etc.

If he had been harboring any doubts about his new position, Rabbi Greisman was quickly made to realize what he had gotten himself into. The next day, he received a phone call from the Rebbe's *mazkir*, his brother-in-law, Rabbi Binyomin Klein, with an astonishing message. The Rebbe had told him the following: "Call your brother-in-law—he is involved in the *Sefer Torah*—and ask him how many children have bought a letter. Not how many letters the *sofer* wrote, but how many children bought a letter in the Torah."

Rabbi Greisman answered that he would look at the lists and let him know, and when Rabbi Klein called him back the next day, Rabbi Greisman gave over the tallies. Later on, Rabbi Klein called him back to tell him that the Rebbe had been surprised by the numbers. "This is with the whole *shturem*!?" [I.e. Why isn't there more?] The Rebbe told Rabbi Klein that he should call Rabbi Greisman back the next week for another update. From then on Rabbi Greisman sent Rabbi Klein a weekly *duch* for the Rebbe. In fact, several times when Rabbi Klein went into the Rebbe on Friday, the Rebbe himself asked whether the *duch* was ready yet.

DOWN TO THE LAST DETAIL

In contrast to most other *mitvzoim* and projects that the Rebbe initiated, where the Rebbe would generally give broad *hora'os* and leave the technical details up to the Chassidim, here the Rebbe was involved at every step of the way. Throughout the process the Rebbe displayed an intimate,

empathetic understanding of a child's mindset and inner life, guiding every part of the *mitvza* based on what would excite, motivate, and involve the children.

One issue involved the certificates the children would receive for buying the letters, which the Rebbe addressed at length in the *farbrenge*n of Yud-Beis Nissan³. As was often the case, these weren't just simple instructions; rather, in a lively *sicha*, the Rebbe provided fascinating, down-to-earth insight into a seemingly mundane process.

FULL DISCLOSURE?

There is a custom in many communities, the Rebbe began, that when someone buys a letter in a *sefer Torah*, he receives a certificate indicating which letter is his. This is done because without a certificate, the person buying the letter would have no way to discern whether he was actually assigned his own letter or not. The certificate confirms that he actually has a letter.

However, it can happen that when a person receives his certificate and discovers which part of the Torah his letter is in, he is miserably disappointed. *What type of letter did I buy? Look at what word it's in!* The letter that he bought, the letter that belongs to him, *his* letter in the *sefer Torah*, is in a negative word or *parsha!*

One might argue that it shouldn't really matter; all words in the Torah are holy! These words are just as crucial to the completeness of the *sefer Torah* as Hashem's names. Who cares what letter you received?

And yet, the fact remains that we are dealing with human beings, and you cannot compare having a letter in the words "*v'achos lotan timna*" to having a letter in the name of Hashem. This difference is even recognized in *halacha*; when a *sofer* writes the names of Hashem, he must be in a higher

level of holiness than when he writes the rest of the Torah.

Thus, when you let people know the exact letter they received, it will often cause anxiety and dismay. Besides for causing a Yid pain—which must always be avoided—there is another issue involved: the very fact that a Yid is scared can affect his *mazal*.

Instead, the Rebbe suggested, the certificate should only name the *parsha* that the letter is in—to confirm that a letter was indeed assigned to this individual—without stating the actual word it is in.

Following this proposal, the Rebbe gave another, related *hora'ah*. The decision of which letter goes to whom should not be left up to a person in the office, rather it should be done by *gorel*, which, as we know, is *al pi Hashem*.

It quickly became evident that the Rebbe viewed the certificate, and even its design, as a crucial part of the *mitzva*, spending several *sichos* and many *maanos* giving instructions on every detail. For example, the Rebbe said that the certificate must be beautifully designed, because this would show the children the importance and significance of having a letter, and also encourage other children seeing the certificate to buy a letter for themselves. As such, the certificate must be nice enough that a child should want to hang it on his wall and show it off to his friends. In fact, when the *vaad* sent the Rebbe a first draft of the certificate, he rejected it on the grounds that the color and quality of the paper weren't good enough.

Other instructions included: the certificates should be signed at the bottom (either by one of the rabbanim, or by the *mazkir Beis Din*) in order to emphasize their value and importance; it should include a picture of the *choma* surrounding Yerushalayim,

they should all be in *Lashon Kodesh*, regardless of where they are being sent (with the exception of the children's names, if applicable). The Rebbe also instructed that it include pictures (or drawings) of the *mekomos hakedoshim* in Eretz Yisroel, and specifically placed the picture of the Kosel at the top right side of the page.

THE CHILD HIMSELF

Since the goal of the *mitzva* is that each child should have a letter in the *sefer Torah*, one might imagine that it doesn't matter who actually fills out the form to buy the letter, whether it's the father, mother, sibling, or child himself. However, the Rebbe instructed⁴ that the children should do it themselves, giving two reasons: firstly, this would draw them in and get them involved. Secondly, although a child's intent has no significance according to *halacha*—"a child has no *machshava*"—his action is very significant—and especially when the work is so difficult. "When a child sits down to write," the Rebbe described, "he sticks his tongue out between his

teeth, deliberates to himself, and rolls up his sleeves. Then he looks at his pen or pencil and thinks about how to turn it, after which he labors to ensure that the shape of the letters should come out right. And then there are some children who are *mehader* and want their signature to come out nice, so instead of just signing a regular signature, they draw a picture with a toy, and the like." For a child, writing is a big deal!

This work that the child invests will arouse the deepest fondness from Above, and therefore, although the handwriting may be hard to read, and it might even be difficult to discern whether the child was trying to write an *Alef* or draw a picture of two buckets of water hanging on a stick (as the *melamdim* used to describe an *alef*), it's all worth it. However, the Rebbe added, if after all their labor, the form is still not legible, the parents should add a note clarifying the contents.

Regarding infants and small children, who can't do it themselves, the Rebbe said that all of the steps of



SEPHARDIC CHIEF RABBI OF ISRAEL MORDECHAI ELIYAHU FILLS IN A LETTER AT THE SECOND SIYUM, CHOF AV 5746.

signing up—completing the forms and putting them into envelopes—should be done in front of them. Because, as Torah has always said and science recently concluded as well, even newborns are affected by their surroundings, and they will thereby be included in the *mitvza*.

Women are central to the *mitvza*, the Rebbe said⁵, because as the *akeres habayis*, the mainstay of the home, a mother is more involved with her children than the father. Also, the child should be doing this on his own—spending his own dollar—and a woman is much more effective at convincing and motivating children than a man.

HITTING THE STREETS

The task before the Chassidim was staggering—to recruit over three hundred thousand children; a mind boggling number! The scale of the *mitvza* and audacity of the goal was unprecedented. But after so many spirited *sichos* from the Rebbe, after such urgent galvanizing and encouragement, they got down to business. Final brochures and forms were printed, and chassidim used every avenue available to enlist children, spreading across New York in cars and station wagons with mounted loudspeakers and going door to door in communities, standing on street corners in Manhattan handing out brochures, and publishing advertisements in all the Jewish newspapers.

And this was only in New York. Across the United States and throughout the world, shluchim were signing up all the children they could find, as fast as was humanly possible. When the shluchim in Morocco wrote to the Rebbe that they had managed to sign up 827 children by the 17th of Iyar, they received a remarkably warm *maane*: “At every opportunity (*bichol*



THE ORIGINAL REGISTRATION FORM FOR CHILDREN TO PURCHASE THEIR OWN LETTER IN THE TORAH.

eis mitzoi) I will mention them at the *tziyon*.” Following this, they took a *hachlota* to double and triple their activities going forward.

In Eretz Yisroel, the center of it all, the activities were in high gear; men, women, and children all pitched in to enroll as many children as possible.

The activities weren’t limited to *bochurim* or newly married *yungelait*, or even to shluchim and *baalei batim*. Lubavitcher rabbanim too, threw themselves into the *mitvza*, visiting various rebbes, *roshei yeshivos*, and rabbanim all over America and Eretz Yisroel to sign up their children. *Gedolei Yisrael* from all across the political and religious spectrum signed up their children and grandchildren, and many came out with letters supporting the *mitvza*, encouraging their followers to follow their example. The Belzer Rebbe signed up his child and called to all his Chassidim to do the same; Rabbi Moshe Feinstein signed up not only all of his grandchildren, but all the *talmidim* in his *mosdos*; the Baba Sali published a letter promising his personal *brocha* for every child that signs up; and Rabbi Weiss of the *Eida Hachareidis* in Yerushalayim said that he would make a list of all his grandchildren and send

it in. *Kol koreh’s* encouraging people to join the *mitvza* were signed by dozens of *gedolei Yisroel* and distributed throughout the Jewish world.

The *mitvza* reached so far, that when a group of N’shei Chabad went to meet the Skverer Rebbetzin in New York to ask her to enroll her children, she replied that there was no need—her father, the Munkatcher Rebbe, had already signed them up together with his other grandchildren! Instead, she committed to encouraging the women of Skver to sign up their children. “Only the Lubavitcher Rebbe could come up with such a *mitvza*,” her father, the Munkatcher Rebbe remarked.

Throughout the Jewish world, and even more so in Lubavitch, this was the burning *mitvza* of the month. It was the topic of conversation on everyone’s lips, the focus of all



mitzvoim, and even the subject of their Torah learning. On Acharon Shel Pesach, when the Rebbe delivered⁶ his annual contribution to the Kinus Torah, the topic he spoke about was the mitzvah of writing a *sefer Torah*.

UPPING THE ANTE

Then the Rebbe took it up a notch. At the farbrengen of Rosh Chodesh Iyar, the Rebbe set⁷ the first deadline—the end of the year, so that the Torah would be completed by the end of the *shnas Hakhel*. This, of course, upped the ante for recruiting the children; now they were down to five months to find all three hundred thousand children! But it also created a very practical problem: a *sofer* simply cannot write a Torah in such a short time. So the Rebbe proposed a simple solution: recruit another *sofer*. After the first *sofer* estimates how much he will be able to finish by the end of the year, the second *sofer* can immediately begin writing from that point on.

Following the Rebbe's directives, the Beis Din appointed Rabbi Shimshon Kahane from Kfar Chabad, a *sofer* whose handwriting was similar to Rabbi Henig's—a quality which the

AN AIRPLANE CIRCLED OVERHEAD, DROPPING LEAFLETS AND BALLOONS WITH TAGLINES ABOUT THE SEFER TORAH.



Rebbe had said to look for—to write the second half of the Torah.

The activities of *shluchim*, *baalei batim*, and *bochurim* throughout the world took on a new urgency, as they raced against the clock to recruit enough children to complete the Torah by the end of the year; which came out to about fifteen thousand children a week! Little did they know that this was still only the beginning.

A TIME OF DANGER

On Yud-Gimmel Iyar (a few weeks later) the Rebbe sent out a *michtav klali*⁸ addressed to the entire Jewish nation. The physical and spiritual well being of Jews and Judaism throughout

the world is in danger, the Rebbe wrote, and there is one solution to this crisis: ..ונתתי גשמיכם... ונתתי שלום בארץ... If we learn Torah and fulfill mitzvos, Hashem will provide us with all we need, and bless us with peace. Specifically, the Rebbe proposed, people should arrange *kinusim* of Yidden, for children too, at every opportunity, where they will add in Torah, tefillah, and tzedaka. The Rebbe then added plea to all of *klal Yisrael*—“a *bakasha nafshis*, in all *leshonos* of *bakasha*, that Yidden should unite by fulfilling the mitzvah of *ve'ahavta l'reiacha kamocho*.”

At first, there was no evident connection between these gatherings and the *sefer Torah* for children. Then, a few days later, a directive arrived from the Rebbe's *mazkirus*, stating that it was especially crucial to sign children up for the *sefer Torah* in the weeks between Lag B'omer and Shavuot.

The Chassidim's activities intensified. One remarkable scene was in Meron on Lag B'omer. As people started pouring into the city on Erev Lag B'omer, the Lubavitchers were ready. Dozens of booths were set up all over, manned by groups of volunteers shouting into megaphones and inviting people over. Other volunteers were sprinkled over the entire area, distributing brochures to the milling crowds and directing them towards the booths. An airplane circled overhead, dropping leaflets and balloons with taglines about the *sefer Torah*.

The demand was incredible. Throngs of people congregated around the booths to sign up their children. All schisms and boundaries fell away, as Ashkenazim and Sephardim, blue collar workers and professionals, regular people and prominent public figures, all joined in on the *mitvza*. Innumerable amounts of people were reached and letters sold.



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A FLOAT PROMOTING THE SEFER TORAH L'YALDEI YISROEL PASSES BY THE REBBE AT THE LAG B'OMER PARADE OF 5743.

The activities on Lag B'omer were but one example of the Chassidim worldwide heeding the Rebbe's call. But, as far as the reasoning behind it all—on that the Chassidim were still in the dark. Why the sudden urgency? What was the emergency?

That next Shabbos, and in the following farbrengens, the Rebbe explained at length.

ON THE BRINK

The world is shaking and trembling, the Rebbe said⁹, sitting on the brink of total destruction. One phenomenon he pointed out was the unlimited power of destruction the nuclear bomb had given to individual evil actors. In days bygone, causing major destruction took sophisticated planning and large groups of people. But in today's world, one maniac can destroy the entire planet with the push of a button! When normal people have access to such destruction, you can at least try predicting what they're going

to do next; but when you're dealing with a madman, this is impossible—you can never imagine what crazy idea will fall into his head. The fate of the world depends on the next move of some crazy king in Africa or elsewhere, or some other *meshugene* roaming around ready to sneak into a nuclear bunker.

The Rebbe also pointed to the shooting of the president as evidence of the fraying fear of authority in the world. *The president himself was shot*—and, after a few weeks of excitement in the newspapers, everyone goes back to their normal day to day lives, as if nothing ever happened! *That's an old story, they say, there are new stories on the table now; and anyways who cares about what some crazy guy did?* How can you casually brush off what happened when the threat is not gone?! He is likely to be released and do it again!

The situation in the world, the Rebbe concluded, is getting worse

by the week, and no one knows what tomorrow will bring. It is only Hashem's kindness that is saving the world from utter destruction.

Why does Hashem allow this? Why do the madmen of the world have free reign? It must be, the Rebbe said, because Hashem wants the Yidden to wake up and strengthen their fulfillment of Torah and mitzvos.

But, more specifically, the discord of the greater world stems from discord in the Jewish world, in multiple arenas. Some people are engaging in smear campaigns against other Yidden with no regard to the truth or impact of their words. Others aren't satisfied with sticking to their own field of work, instead trampling over other people's work and causing discord among Yidden.

"How much *sinas chinam* can you have?" the Rebbe cried. "*Viful iz der shiur?*"

What can be done? First of all, the Rebbe said, all Yidden must

IN DAYS BYGONE, CAUSING MAJOR DESTRUCTION TOOK SOPHISTICATED PLANNING AND LARGE GROUPS OF PEOPLE. BUT IN TODAY'S WORLD, ONE MANIAC CAN DESTROY THE ENTIRE PLANET WITH THE PUSH OF A BUTTON!



add in *ahavas chinam*. But this isn't enough. Something more must be done; something to unite all Yidden together, a *mitzva* that will join them as one. And this, the Rebbe explained, was why there was a special push to buy letters in a unity *sefer Torah*.

This unity *sefer Torah* is specifically for children because when older people make a *sefer Torah*, *Beis Din Shel Ma'alah* can always come looking for problems and deficiencies; but when children make a *sefer Torah*, the *Beis Din Shel Ma'alah* has no power, for they are *hevel she'ain boi chet*—breath with no sin. *Al tigu bimeshichoi!* Hashem commands the *Beis Din Shel Ma'alah*, do not touch the *tinokos shel beis rabbon!*

Since this is the way to bring peace to the world, all *hagbalos* and

limitations on the *mitzva* are now removed, and it must be done with the greatest *shturem* and *zrizus!*

ON BLACK AND WHITE

On Shabbos Parshas Naso¹⁰, the Rebbe upped the ante once more. Considering that “fear of flesh and blood” can be more motivating than the “fear of heaven”, the Chassidim would now be held personally accountable to the Rebbe. The Rebbe instructed that every person should compile a list of how many letters were purchased in their area by Shavuos and send it “here, to the *reshus* of the Friediker Rebbe, *nesi doreinu*, in the city of his Ohel and *tziyon*.” (Since only a short time remained until Shavuos, another list should be

compiled before Yud-Beis Sivan as well.)

No one wanted to come up short, and the following day, Erev Shavuos, a day of hectic Yom Tov preparations and harried housework, Chassidim did the almost unthinkable and went out to sign children up for the *sefer Torah*. In the late afternoon hours of Erev Shavuos, the Rebbe received the lists he requested. (During the *farbrenge*n on Shavuos, after again speaking at length about the *mitzva*, he asked that, aside for the list compiled before Yud-Beis Sivan, another list should be sent in by Tes-Vov Sivan.)

Later on, it was revealed that this period marked a turning point in the history of the Yidden living in Eretz Yisroel. On Erev Shavuos, as Lubavitcher Chassidim signing children up and sending their lists to the Rebbe, a squadron of planes was taking off from Israel to bomb Saddam Hussein's nuclear plants in Iraq. It took only a minute and twenty seconds to decimate the plants completely, and an hour and a half later, all the planes and pilots were back in Israel, unharmed. Saddam Hussein's perverse aspirations were gone forever, and the shadow of nuclear devastation was removed from over Israel for years to come.

As senior military officers would later relate, they were up against incredible odds from every conceivable angle, both military and diplomatic. For example, the planes were sold to them by America solely for peaceful purposes, with Americans standing by full-time to ensure this, and yet, somehow, with all the frenzied preparations, they did not pick up on what was happening. Additionally, the planes were brand new and untested, yet not a single one had failed during flight. Also, they carried the exact amount of fuel necessary to get to Iraq and back, leaving zero room for error; yet every single plane made it back. And perhaps the most famous part of

Throughout this time period, the Rebbe would ask almost every boy and girl who came into *yechidus* whether they had a letter in the *sefer Torah*. If there was a group of children, the Rebbe would ask the first child passing by, “Do you have a letter in the *sefer Torah* for *yaldei Yisroel?*” And then he would ask the following ones, “And you?” “And you?”

These questions were directed at *shluchim* as well: one Erev Shabbos, as the Rebbe was walking into 770, he turned to Rabbi Shlomo Cunin and asked him whether every child in California has a letter yet.

The *mazkirim* related that on many occasions, when families would request a *brocha* for a child's health, the Rebbe would tell them to inquire whether he or she has a letter in the Torah. In one *maane*, the Rebbe writes, “Surely in the merit of their daughter *tichye*, they bought a letter in the *sefer Torah* which is being written in *Yerushalayim Ir Hakodesh*, within the [Old City] walls, and may she have lengthy and good years.”

BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN

No matter the time and context, the Jewish community of the USSR was always on the Rebbe's mind, and this *mitvza* was no exception. Throughout the farbrengens in these months, the Rebbe encouraged people to purchase letters for their relatives living behind the Iron Curtain, since this would unite them with their brothers and sisters throughout the world, transcending all physical barriers and limitations.

In a later *sicha*¹¹, in order to demonstrate the lasting impact of the *mitvza* in general, the Rebbe brought an example from a child living in the USSR who, having no prior knowledge about Yiddishkeit, is approached about buying a letter in the *sefer Torah*. After hearing a speech about how there is this thing called a “*sefer Torah*,” and how this *sefer Torah* has a connection to him, he goes home to his parents and asks them [and here the Rebbe switches to Russian], “*Shta tokaye sefer Torah?*” [“What is this *sefer Torah*?”].

His parents, having grown up in a small Russian *shtetl* under communist rule, don't either know what a *sefer Torah* is. So they, in turn, look for someone else who might know—a *zeide*, *bubbe*, or an older Yid in the *shtetl*—and ask them the same question, “*Shta tokaye sefer Torah?*” This person tells the child what a *sefer Torah* is; sneaks into a shul to show them one in the *aron kodesh*; and explains to him how Torah is a personal *hora'ah* for him, notwithstanding the fact that neither he, his father, nor his mother, have ever seen one their entire lives. Thus, the effect of telling a child about the *sefer Torah* isn't limited to the *sefer Torah* itself - it can be a springing board to spark their interest in Yiddishkeit and its fulfillment.

The Rebbe continued that, unfortunately, these children don't exist only in the USSR. Even in other countries, which are not under communist rule—even in the United States—there are children who have never seen a *sefer Torah*. When they are told that all Jewish children—no matter who raised them, how they were raised, or where their parents belong—have a letter in the *sefer Torah*, it will bring them closer to Yiddishkeit.

the episode occurred as they flew over the Mediterranean. From his yacht, the king of Jordan saw the planes flying overhead and immediately called the Iraqis to warn them, but his warning was ignored. And flying into Iraq and over the nuclear plants, they were expecting to encounter some type of resistance, but not one anti-craft missile was shot their way. These are only the revealed miracles that the Israeli Air Force experienced in planning and executing this daring operation.

Chassidim at the time felt that, perhaps, this was what the Rebbe's *shturem* had been all about. As with the Yom Kippur War and countless times before and after, the Rebbe anticipated the crisis and spiritually prepared the Jewish nation for what was to come.

FINISH IT OFF!

Towards the beginning of the *mitvza*, the Rebbe had set Erev Rosh Hashanah as the goal for recruiting all the children and completing the *sefer Torah*; an extremely ambitious objective. However, as the weeks passed and the Jewish nation got caught up in the storm of excitement, the Rebbe pulled back the deadline, first setting it for the end of Sivan, then for Yud-Beis Tammuz. Ultimately, all the letters were sold



RABBI ZALMAN GURARY ADDRESSES THE CROWD AT THE FIRST SIYUM.



THE SEFER TORAH IS CARRIED OUT OF THE TZEMACH TZEDEK SHUL BEGINNING THE PROCESSION TO THE KOSEL FOR THE GRAND EVENT.

by the end of Tammuz. Less than four months after the Rebbe had first introduced the idea, over three hundred thousand children had signed up for a letter in the *sefer Torah*!

Looking at the lists of children that were included in this Torah, the organizers came to realize the magnitude of what had occurred before their very eyes. The children came from every sector and stratum of the Jewish world—Chareidim, Modern Orthodox, and non-religious; extreme *kana'im* and anti-religious fanatics; Chassidim and Litvaks—there was not a part of the Jewish world that hadn't participated. And they came from all types of communities throughout the world—from big urban cities with large Jewish communities, to small towns without a rabbi; from the suburbs of California to the wastelands of Russia; from New York to Africa to the Arab world.

THE REBBE'S DESIGN

Seeing the *sefer Torah* of *yaldei Yisrael*, one notices that it doesn't look like a regular *sefer Torah*, with two items standing out in particular: the huge, towering crown, and the unique *mantel*. This isn't a coincidence, as both were designed by the Rebbe.

The story of the crown actually began towards the beginning of the *mitvza*. In one of the *farbrengens* where the Rebbe spoke about the *sefer Torah*, he also spoke about giving *tzedaka* in a manner of *lechtachila ariber*. Following this *sicha*, Rabbi Zalman Gurary, a prominent Chassid, decided that he would donate the crown, and when he reported this to the Rebbe, the Rebbe told him that it should be designed like the *sefer Torah shel Moshiach* (which the Rebbe had personally designed years earlier). Rabbi Gurary asked if he could change one thing: the crown on the *sefer Torah shel Moshiach* was only partially made



of gold, and he wanted to make this one of pure gold. The Rebbe agreed.

A photograph was taken of the original crown, based off which a sculptor managed to create an identical crown of gold. Later on, about a week before the *siyum*, the Rebbe gave the *hora'ah*, through *mazkirus*, that Rabbi Gurary should bring the crown to Eretz Yisroel and place it on the *sefer Torah* as his *shliach*.

The story of the Torah *mantel* is even more unusual; the Rebbe designed every detail of it himself, down to the dimensions of the *luchos*

(see sidebar), and gave \$118 for each of the Torah *mantelach*—white and blue—on behalf of himself and the Rebbetzin.

A PERSONAL SHLIACH

During the *farbrengen* of Shabbos parshas Va'eschanan, on 15 Av, the Rebbe announced¹² that the date of the *siyum* had been set for Chof Av, and word got out that the Rebbe would be sending a special *shliach* to Eretz Yisroel, Reb Zalman Shimon Dvorkin, the rov of Crown Heights. On the morning of 17 Av, Rabbi Dvorkin was

Below is a rare document with the Rebbe's handwritten design for the new *mantel*.

On top, the Rebbe titles the page as **design on the mantel**

Both on the white mantel for Tishrei, and on the t'chailes

Under that is a sketch of the *luchos*, along with dimensions: on top of each *luach*, the Rebbe writes (**three tefachim**)—which comes out to six *tefachim* widthwise—and on the side, the Rebbe writes (**six tefachim**).

Unlike most *mantelach* with *luchos*, where they are merely one element of the design, here the *luchos* cover most of the *mantel*, and stretch around the sides of the Torah.

Under the *luchos*, the Rebbe writes the *possuk* **Torah Tziva Lanu Moshe Morasha Kehillas Yaakov**, adding that **this is only if it's possible to fit it in the width of the luchos and no more**, i.e. if the *possuk* shouldn't extend wider than the *luchos*.

Then the Rebbe added that **On every one of the atzei chayim** should be written **the possuk Aitz... [chayim hi lamachazikim] boh**. And also the *possuk* **Torah Tziva..[lanu Moshe morasha kehillas] Yaakov**.

It is interesting to note that at one point an idea arose to fashion the *atzei chayim* out of silver, to which the Rebbe answered, "*Aitz chayim* is wood, not silver."



called into the Rebbe's room, where he was given a few things to take along on his trip: \$1,200 to participate in the expenses of the *sefer Torah*; \$118 for each of the covers (as mentioned above); money to be distributed as *tzedaka* in Eretz Yisrael; and a bottle of *mashke* from a *farbrenge*n in Russia (which had been sent to the Rebbe earlier). The Rebbe also directed him, as his *shliach*, to write a letter in the *sefer Torah* that was being completed, as well as in the second *sefer Torah*, which was just being started, and emphasized that he would be going as a *shliach*—of the Rebbe and of all *rabbanim*—not as a *rov*.

When they were done, the Rebbe escorted Rabbi Dvorkin until the door of *Gan Eden Hatachton*, following him with his eyes until he left 770.

That afternoon, Rabbi Dvorkin was sent off amidst song and dance, accompanied to the airport by a group of prominent members of *anash*, including Rabbi Hodakov, Rabbi Mordechai Mentlik, and others. After a short *farbrenge*n in the airport, Rabbi Dvorkin was driven directly to the foot of the plane. (Upon his return, Rabbi Dvorkin went into *yechidus*, and the Rebbe asked about all the various details of the *shlichus*.)

THE SIYUM

After weeks and weeks of tireless preparation, the big moment finally arrived.

The *siyum* commenced in the Tzemach Tzedek shul in Yerushalayim, where hundreds of Chassidim gathered for the ceremony completing the Torah, which would later be followed by a parade to the Kosel. Dozens of different *rabbonim*, *roshei yeshivos* and *rebbe*s were present for the celebration, and honored to fill in the letters in the Torah. Afterwards Rabbi Dvorkin, as the Rebbe's *shliach*, wrote in the final letter. As the *rabbonim* were completing the Torah



RABBI ZALMAN SHIMON DVORKIN, WHO WAS SENT AS THE REBBE'S PERSONAL SHLIACH TO THE FIRST SIYUM, MAKES A L'CHAIM AND FILLS IN A LETTER OF THE ALMOST COMPLETE TORAH.

1/ Scenes of the second Siyum Sefer Torah L'Yaldei Yisroel, Chof Av 5746 2/



JEM/THE LIVING ARCHIVE



JEM/THE LIVING ARCHIVE



JEM/THE LIVING ARCHIVE ID: 147745



JEM/THE LIVING ARCHIVE



JEM/THE LIVING ARCHIVE



JEM/THE LIVING ARCHIVE



1. CHILDREN SURROUND THE SOFER IN THE TZEMACH TZEDEK SHUL IN THE OLD CITY OF YERUSHALAYIM, AS THE LAST LETTERS ARE FILLED IN. THE SIYUM IS ABOUT TO BEGIN. 2. RABBI ZUSHE WILMOVSKY, THE PARTIZAN, MAKES A L'CHAIM WITH THE CHILDREN. 3. THE SEFER TORAH IS ESCORTED AMIDST SINGING AND DANCING THROUGH THE WINDY STREETS OF THE OLD CITY OF YERUSHALAYIM TOWARD THE KOSEL PLAZA. 4. THRONGS OF MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN JOIN THE CELEBRATIONS AT THE KOSEL PLAZA. 5. CHILDREN JOIN THE NEW SEFER TORAH ON THE PODIUM. 6. THE DAIS IS FILLED WITH LEADING RABONIM AND REBBES OF ERETZ YISROEL IN CELEBRATION OF THE NEW SEFER TORAH.



Kosel, where thousands of people from all over Eretz Yisrael were waiting to greet them. The *sifrei Torah* of the Kosel were taken out to greet the new one, and, following the reading of *Ata Horeisa*, seven huge *hakafos* were made, as tourists and passersby alike joined in the excitement. Tears filled their eyes and joy filled their hearts.

Following a speech by a representative of the children, the Torah was returned to the Tzemach Tzedek shul, where a *seuda* and *farbrenge* took place. They *farbrenge* until 3:30 am, when it was time to listen to the hook-up of the Rebbe's Chof Av *farbrenge*, during which the Rebbe spoke at length about the new *sefer Torah*.

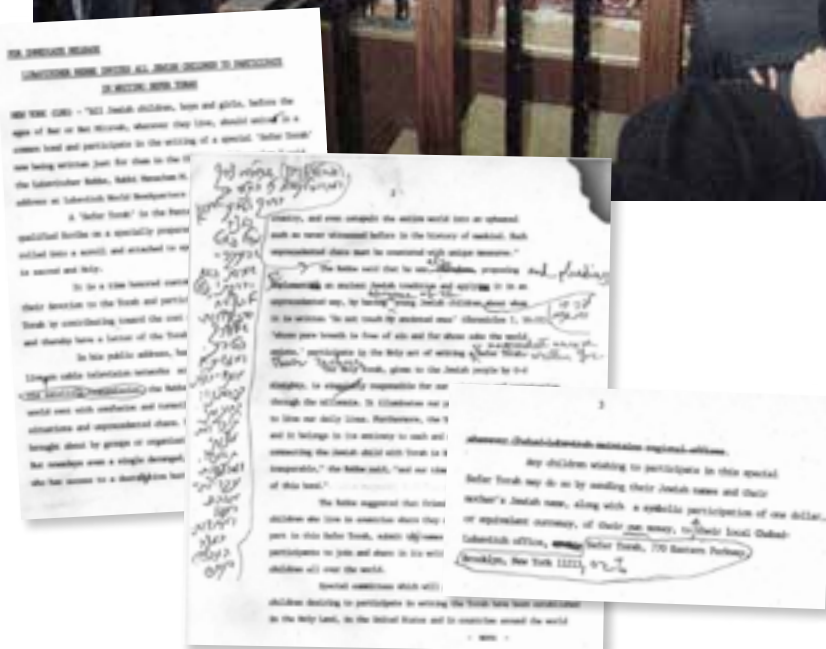
NEW FRONTIERS

At the *farbrenge* of erev Rosh Hashanah a few weeks later, the Rebbe related¹³ that someone had come to him with a complaint: “*Viful iz a shiur* to speak about writing a *sefer Torah* for *yaldei Yisrael*? We have to be more concerned about those who are connected to *hevel sheyesh boi chet* - the adults?!”

“This complaint”, the Rebbe said, “was accepted [by me].”

Thus, the campaign of *sifrei Torah haklolyim* began. It turned out that the *sefer Torah* for *yaldei Yisrael* was only the first stage in a project of an even grander scale: that every Yid, no matter their age and even if they have already passed on, should have a letter in a *sefer Torah*. The Rebbe explained that it had started with children because Jewish unity—the goal of the *sifrei Torah*—is easier achieved by children, but upon accomplishing this with children, it could now be taken to the adults.

Unlike the *sefer Torah* for *yaldei Yisrael*, which was under the Rebbe's direct supervision, the *Torahs* for adults were commissioned by several different organizations, mainly



THE REBBE'S HAGAHOS ON A PRESS-RELEASE ABOUT OIS B'SEFER TORAH.

inside the Tzemach Tzedek shul, the street outside began filling up with people; by the time the parade was to begin, it was overflowing, with barely any room to move. The gates of the shul opened, a *chupa* was unfurled, and the procession began.

Leading the parade were the children, carrying burning tapers, followed by the rest of the crowd, and accompanied by a marching band and heavy security. They weaved their way through the narrow streets of Yerushalayim until they arrived at the

ON MANY OCCASIONS,
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TORAH.



Tomchei Temimim and Beis Rivka. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss this wide-reaching *mitvza*, but suffice it to say the Rebbe spoke about it tirelessly throughout the following year, and spent countless *sichos* *shtureming* about it without rest. It became one of the *mitvzoim haklolyim* mentioned at every *farbrengen*.

Stressing the importance of acquiring a letter in one of the *sifrei Torah*, the Rebbe quoted¹⁴ the *possuk* in Daniel, ובעת ההיא ימלט עמר כל הנמצא. כתוב בספר. Meaning, although the world is going through difficult times, the Yidden will be okay, for Hashem protects them. But the condition stipulated in the *possuk* is that they be inscribed in Hashem's *sefer*; the *sefer Torah*. (Shabbos parshas Mikeitz 5742).

Sifrei Torah continue to be written today. The office of *sifrei Torah* for *yaldei Yisrael*, which has completed five *Torahs* to date, is run by Rabbi Shmuel Greisman, and the office for *sifrei Torah haklolyim* is under the direction of Rabbi Moshe Oirechman. The sixth *sefer Torah* for *yaldei Yisrael* is coming close to completion, with less than a hundred thousand letters remaining, and the aim is to finish it by this summer.

Although this is one of the *mitvzoim* in which the Rebbe invested so much time, energy, and effort, it is also one that is easy to overlook, since—unlike the other *mitvzoim*—it

is a one time event, per person. So take a moment and think: Do you have a letter in the *sefer Torah haklali*? Do your siblings or children have one in the *sefer Torah* for *yaldei Yisrael*? Then, aside for your family, reach out to friends, acquaintances, *mitvzoim* friends, and beyond, and introduce them to this opportunity. In addition to fulfilling the Rebbe's directives—the primary motivation in every *mitvza*—the spiritual effects and rewards are tremendous, and it is the greatest gift you can give them. **T**

1. Sichos Kodesh 5741 vol 3, p. 129.
2. Ibid. p. 139.
3. Ibid. p. 145-148.
4. Ibid. p. 188-193.
5. Ibid. p. 487.
6. Ibid. p. 315.
7. Ibid. p. 423.
8. Likutei Sichos vol 22. p. 321.
9. Sichos Kodesh 5741 vol 3, p. 476.
10. Ibid. 581.
11. Likutei Sichos vol 23. p. 296-297.
12. Sichos Kodesh 5741 vol 4, p. 424.
13. Ibid. P 765.
14. Hisva'aduyos 5742 vol 2, p. 624.

WHERE CAN I SIGN UP?

Sefer Torah for Yaldei Yisrael:

KidsTorah.org

Sefer Torah Haklali:

www.chabad.org/409282

Remember that the forms should be filled in by the children themselves, or, with infants, in front of them.

