



"עוילן זיך און אונטערן און אונטערן און אונטערן"

With Heart & Soul

THE LIFE OF
REB YOCHANAN GORDON



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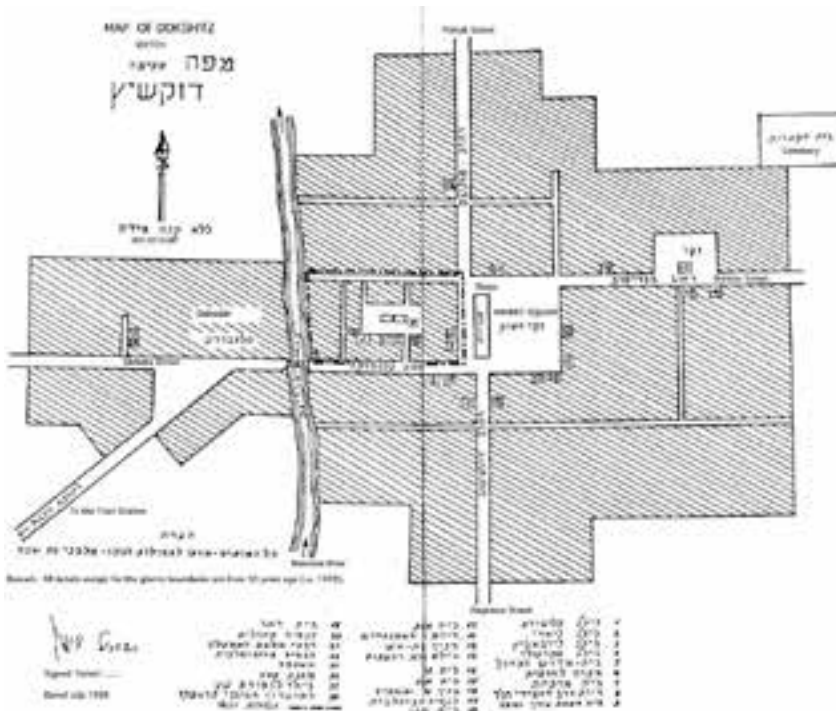
Photos: JEM, Gordon Family, Rabbi Moshe Klein

When the news came to the Friediker Rebbe that the Rebbe and Rebbetzin would be arriving on Chof-Ches Sivan 5701 in the United States, the Friediker Rebbe said that "*di gutte freint*" should be notified. When the *mazkir* asked who the good friends are, the Friediker Rebbe answered "Yochanan Gordon."

Reb Yochanan, who served as the *gabbai* of 770 for many years, was a *Chossid par excellence*; he harbored a deep and enduring love for the Rabbeim, and he was a constant *dugma chaya* of someone who would go to any length to bring the Rabbeim *nachas ruach*. Those who knew him recall a person that lived and breathed *hiskashrus* to the Rebbe and a complete and total devotion to his will, which he carried out with dedication and *gusto*.

In the following article, we attempt to take a glimpse into the life of this unique *Chossid*, from whom we can learn so much.

לזכות
הילד החייל בצבאות ה'
ישראל שי'
לרגל ה"אפשערניש" ביום י"א שבט ה'תשע"ו
שכ"ק אדמו"ר והוריו שי' ירוו ממנו נח"ר רב
נדפס ע"י הוריו
הרה"ת לוי יצחק וזוגתו שי' גאלדשטיין



MAP OF DOKSHITZ.

Dokshitz

Reb Yochanan Gordon, or as some remember him, Reb Yochanan Dokshitzer, was born on 23 Iyar 5654 (תרט"ד), in the *chassidische* town of Dokshitz, Belarus, to his parents Reb Yisroel and Esther. Generations earlier, Esther's grandfather had been sent to Dokshitz by the Mittlerer Rebbe to serve there as the town *shochet*, and the prestigious position was later passed down from father-in-law to son-in-law until it reached Reb Yisroel, and then after him to Reb Yochanan.

Dokshitz, a town with a population of around two thousand Yidden, was inhabited predominantly by Chassidim. Five or six shuls were maintained in the small town, and all besides for one followed *nusach* Chabad.

As a child, Reb Yochanan developed a close friendship with a *talmid* in the yeshiva of Dokshitz by the name of Peretz Motchkin, who

would often join the Gordon family's *seudos Shabbos*, and together they went to learn in Lubavitch.

Yochanan's years spent in Lubavitch made a deep impression on him; developing his personality and molding him into the beloved Chossid and dedicated soldier of the Rabbeim that he remained for the rest of his life.

The *bochurim* in Lubavitch would merit to hear a *maamar* from the Rebbe Rashab every Friday night. Reb Yochanan recalled that a complaint was once lodged against the *bochurim*, that some of them were seen dozing off during the sometimes lengthy *maamarim*. When the complaint was brought before the Rebbe Rashab, he replied; "Sleeping at Har Sinai is also something special."

Aside for the weekly *maamarim*, the Rebbe Rashab would *farbreng* on select few occasions, such as Yud-Tes Kislev and Simchas Torah. Reb Yochanan related that the relationship between the Rebbe and the *bochurim* was such that they would hide

behind the *yungeleit* during those events, lest the Rebbe see them; and if the Rebbe Rashab would somehow happen to glance at them, they would immediately run to conceal themselves from fear of his holiness.

THE REBBE RASHAB REPLIED, "SLEEPING AT HAR SINAI IS ALSO SOMETHING SPECIAL".

Becoming a Shochet

In 5677 (תרע"ז), after a number of years in the yeshiva in Lubavitch and Schedrin, Reb Yochanan married Zishe, the daughter of Reb Nissan Klovnov (a cousin of Reb Chatsheh Feigin). On their wedding day, which was also Shushan Purim, the news arrived that a revolution against the despised Czar had broken out, and the celebration took on a whole new life.

After their wedding, the couple moved back to Dokshitz, and Reb Yochanan learned *shechita* from Reb Bentzion Chanowitz, who was the *shochet* in nearby Glubakeh. A few short years later, his father, Reb Yisroel passed away. The community wanted to appoint Reb Yochanan to take his father's position, but he hesitated; he was afraid to take such heavy responsibilities upon himself.

The rov in Dokshitz at the time was Reb Leib Sheinin, a *tomim* from Lubavitch about whom—it was said—the Rebbe Rashab had declared that he was a *beinoni* of the Tanya. (According to a different version, the Rebbe Rashab had said that establishing the entire yeshiva had been worth it just for him.)

When Reb Leib heard that he had refused to take the position, he asked Reb Yochanan for the reason; Reb Yochanan answered him that he is

The Memuneh

Rabbi Yisroel Gordon, Reb Yochanan's son, relates:

When my father was in Lubavitch as a teenager, about seventeen or eighteen years old, they would have a *seder* on Pesach together with the entire yeshiva, including the younger *bochurim* learning in the *shiurim*. The older *bochurim* would be appointed as *memunim* to oversee the tables of younger *bochurim*, and on that Pesach my father was taking charge of a table of *bochurim* that were thirteen or fourteen years old.

Before the *seder* was to begin, the Frierdiker Rebbe, who was then the *menahel* of the Yeshiva, came in to see how it was set up. When he came to my father's table, he picked up the matzah cover to see what was under it.

Now, there are two types of matzah; there is *matzah shmurah mishaas ketzirah*, which is watched carefully from the time of the harvesting, and there is *matzah shmurah mishaas techinah*, which is only watched from the time it is milled and made into flour. The majority of the matzah in Lubavitch of those days was only *shmurah mishaas techinah*, and when the Frierdiker Rebbe picked up the matzah cover he was surprised to see that my

father had three matzos that were *shmurah mishaas ketzirah!*

He asked my father how he had obtained them, and my father answered that "*ah memuneh git zich an eitzah,*" when you are in charge of the *bochurim* you find a way of getting three of the better matzos. The Frierdiker Rebbe was a bit upset at him for doing this, and he told him that tomorrow he wouldn't be allowed to eat lunch.

Of course my father was terribly embarrassed and ashamed; here he is taking care of the younger *bochurim*, and in the process he is disciplined in front of them and told that he can't have lunch the next day. The next morning, after davening, they *benched* Hallel, *davened mussaf*, and everyone went to eat. My father went to the *taichele*, the small river that served as the mikveh, laundry, and swimming pool, and sat down there to relax. He wasn't there for more than ten or fifteen minutes when two of his friends, later well-known chassidim Peretz Motchkin and Shlomo Chaim Kesselman, came running and calling him by his name, saying that the Frierdiker Rebbe wants him to come have *seudas Yom Tov*.

afraid that he might make mistakes. Reb Leib Sheinin looked at him and said:

"Whom should I appoint—someone that is not afraid to make mistakes?"

Over the next ten years, Reb Yochanan served faithfully as the town's *shochet*. During that time, three children were born to him and his wife: Nissan, Sholom Ber, and Esther.

Nissan was gifted with prolific writing talents (later in his life, he merited to document the stories of the Rebbe's childhood as he heard them from Rebbetzin Chana). As in many Jewish towns, there was a lively relationship between the Chassidim and *misnagdim*, and young Nissan would utilize his talents to write posters against Rabbi Galinkin, the town's *misnagdisher rov*, and in support of Reb Leib Sheinin. One morning,



REB YOCHANAN IN HIS YOUTH.



REB YOCHANAN'S REGISTRATION FORM FOR THE "SEFER HACHASSIDIM" - A LIST OF ALL OF ANASH REQUESTED BY THE REBBE IN 1873.

Hecher Fun Zinen

When the Nazis arrived in Dokshitz, they collected all of the Yidden of the town, and herded them all into the shul, where Reb Leib Sheinin was still in the middle of davening *shacharis* (it was already the early afternoon). Once they were sure that all of the Yidden were inside, they locked the doors and set the building on fire.

The entire shul erupted in a panic; people began scaling walls, and screams and growing wails of terror were heard from all directions. In the midst of all this mayhem, Reb Leib Sheinin turned to his congregation and asked them to be quiet and hear what he had to say.

He told them that just as in the *Beis Hamikdash*, the *korbanos* had to be brought together with the proper thoughts and intention, so to when Yidden themselves are offering themselves as *korbanos* to the Aibershter, they must be sure to keep their minds and hearts pure so that they will be a befitting sacrifice.

With that, Reb Leib—still wearing his tallis and tefillin—began to sing the Simchas Torah *niggun*, and the entire crowd packed into the burning shul joined in. When the Nazis realized what was going on, they were incensed. They broke into the shul and brutally murdered Reb Leib.

A number of Yidden managed to survive the burning inferno by digging a tunnel through the shul's cellar. They remained there until the fire cooled off, after which they escaped and joined the partisans in the forests fighting the Nazis. One of these men later arrived in the United States, and visited Reb Yochanan in his sukkah, where he related to him the tragic events that brought about the end of *Yiddishe* Dokshitz. Upon finishing his description, he sighed, "At the end, Reb Leib *iz arup fun zinen*—Reb Leib lost his mind."

Reb Yochanan argued; "*Er iz nit arup fun zinen, er iz geven hecher fun zinen*—what he did was not because he lost his mind; his actions were *limailah mitaam vodaas*."

when Rabbi Galinkin woke up, he saw the town covered in posters, and was overheard muttering, "Oy, Yochanan's son is already up."

Yud-Beis Tammuz in Dokshitz

Rabbi Yisroel Gordon relates:

"The Frierdiker Rebbe was arrested on 15 Sivan 5687 (תרפ"ז), and when the news hit the Jewish communities throughout Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, they were gripped with intense worry and concern.

"I heard from my older brothers, that in our little town Dokshitz, the rof, Reb Leib Sheinin, announced a *bittul melacha*—that means no work can be done. All stores needed to be closed, and everyone assembled in the largest shul to recite Tehillim together.



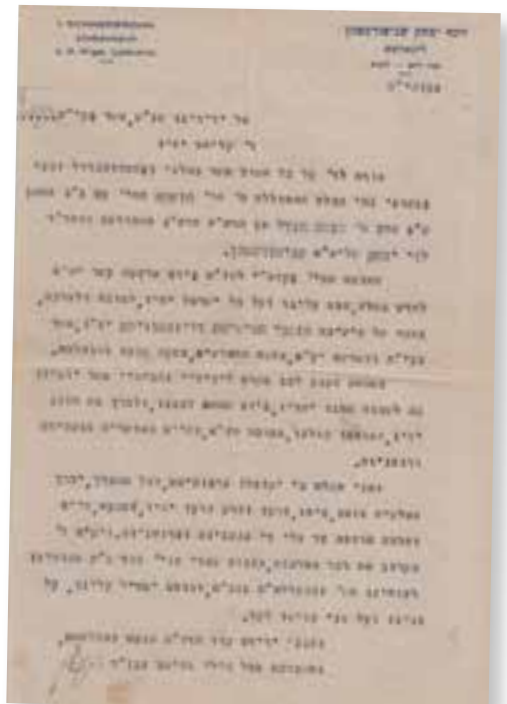
VINTAGE PHOTO OF THE TOWN OF DOKSHITZ.

The *chazan* for Tehillim was my father, Reb Yochanan and he recited it with a lot of emotion and tears.

"The next year, the first anniversary Yud-Beis Tammuz fell out on Shabbos. The custom in Dokshitz, unlike shuls of today, was that *kiddushim* were made in private homes; but this Shabbos a *kiddush* was held in shul. Reb Leib Sheinin and my father—the two individuals that had learnt in Lubavitch—were so happy that they were dancing on the tables. The *simcha* was so great, its intensity equal to the sadness of the year before..."

The Rebbe's Chasunah

In 5688 (תרפ"ח), the news spread that the Frierdiker Rebbe had left Russia and was now living in Riga, Latvia. Eager to see the Rebbe, whom he had not seen for many years, Reb Yochanan borrowed money, and as Tishrei 5689 (תרפ"ט) came around, he traveled to the Rebbe for Rosh Hashanah. While there, he davened



THE INVITATION TO THE REBBE AND REBBETZIN'S CHASUNA SENT BY THE FRIERDIKER REBBE TO THE CHASSIDIM OF DOKSHITZ.

at the *amud* for *shacharis* of Rosh Hashanah, served as the *baal koreh*, and he basked in the presence of the Frierdiker Rebbe, just as he had done by the Rebbe Rashab years earlier.

A short while after he arrived back in Dokshitz, he received an invitation to a wedding: the Frierdiker Rebbe had sent him an invitation for the *chasunah* of the Rebbe and Rebbetzin which would be taking place in Poland. Reb

Yochanan had just gone into debt to pay for his Rosh Hashanah trip, and he didn't think he would be able to afford a whole new journey. In addition to the financial aspect, Reb Yochanan was suffering from a tonsil infection, with a virus and a high fever, to the extent that he could not even leave his bed. The date of the wedding was drawing closer and closer, and he didn't think he would be able to make it.

While he was deliberating his predicament, Reb Leib Sheinin came to visit him. Being that Reb Leib was no man of means, Reb Yochanan had assumed that he would not be making the trip either. To his surprise, Reb Leib told him that he was going, and he expressed surprise when he heard that Reb Yochanan wasn't planning to go as well.

"At the *chasunah* of the Rebbe's daughter to the Rebbe's cousin," Reb Leib reasoned, "all of the Rabbeim, from the Baal Shem Tov and on, will certainly be present¹. When all of the Rabbeim come, I should stay at home?"

There now was no doubt left in Reb Yochanan's mind that he must attend the wedding. Reb Yochanan gathered some strength and went out to borrow some more money. When he returned home, his wife made sure that he slept, drank tea, and took aspirin. After a few days his fever went down a bit and he was able to set out on the journey to Warsaw. Throughout the trip, his fellow Chassidim were dancing and singing with excitement, while he was sick with fever. When they arrived in Warsaw, someone mentioned to the Frierdiker Rebbe that Reb Yochanan was ill. But thankfully, he soon recovered and was able to fully participate in the *simcha*.

For the rest of his life, Reb Yochanan would speak about the celebration and unbounded joy that took place during that week and the great *zechus* he had to attend the



THE REBBE AT THE WEDDING OF REB YOCHANAN'S DAUGHTER ESTHER AND SHIMON GOLDMAN, 28 ADAR 5709.

“AND WHAT I SAW AND HEARD AND FELT WHEN I WAS AT THE CHASUNAH, I HOPE WILL REMAIN WITH ME FOREVER...”

Tanya Ba'al Peh

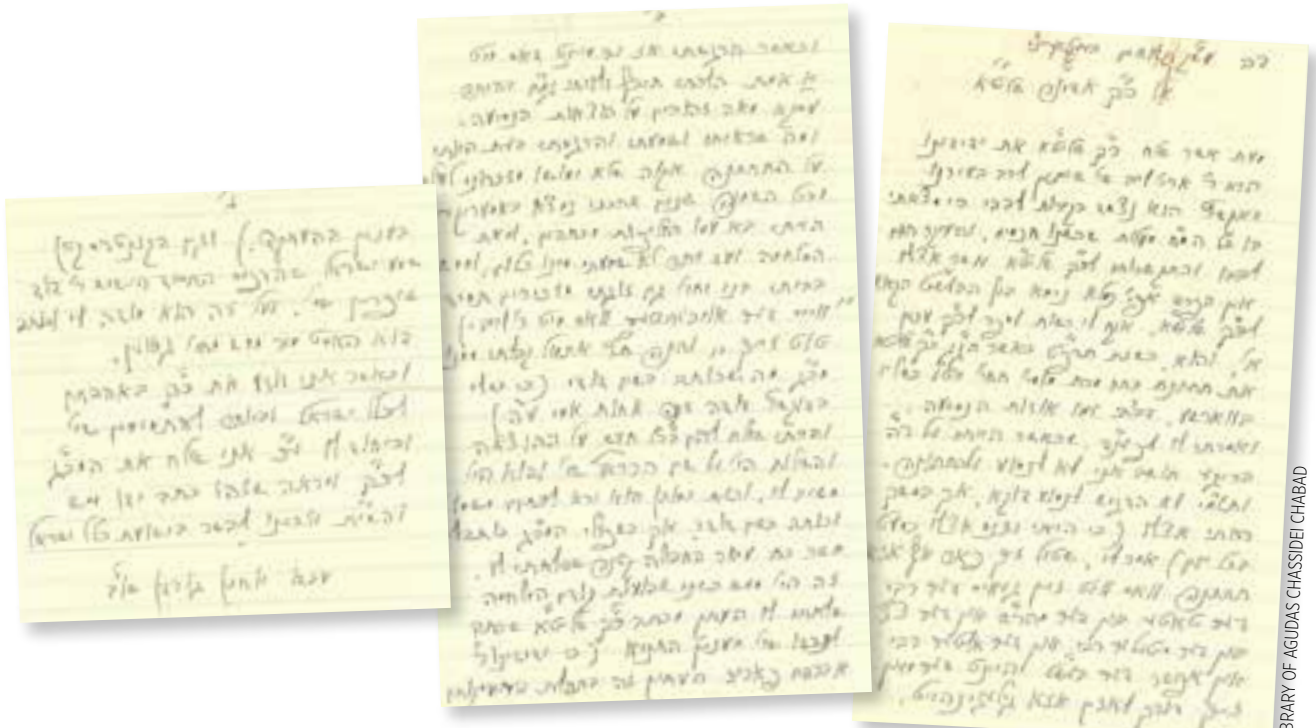
During the period following Tishrei 5691 (תרצ"א), Reb Yochanan's son Sholom Ber, who was a young child at the time, saw his father practicing a poem. He overheard him reciting, "*Onesh hamar al monea bar, vegodel haschar k'maamar raza*." Curious to know what this means, he asked his father to teach the 'poem.' His father seemed surprised.

"What poem are you talking about?" he asked.

"*Onesh hamar*, etc." Sholom Ber answered.

Amused, his father explained to him that he was reciting the *hakdama* to *Tanya*, which speaks of the great merit it is to teach other Yidden whatever you know. He was reciting it because the Frierdiker Rebbe had spoken³ during that Tishrei in praise of learning words of Torah by heart.

People recall how also in his later years, Reb Yochanan would always be *chazzering* words of Torah while walking the streets.



LIBRARY OF AGUDAS CHASSIDEI CHABAD

A LETTER REB YOCHANAN WROTE TO THE FRIEDIKER REBBE, DESCRIBING HOW REB LEIB SHEININ ENCOURAGED HIM TO TRAVEL TO THE REBBE AND REBBETZIN'S CHASUNA.

Rebbe's *chasunah*. He would often reminisce about how the Friediker Rebbe, in a spirit of elation, had put a towel over his shoulder and walked around pouring *marshke* for all of the assembled, blessing each person with whatever he needed. He knew exactly who needed a blessing for a *shidduch* for his child, for *parnassah*, or for good health, and he doled out *brachos* accordingly.

The above is what Reb Yochanan recounted. Other eyewitnesses would add that Reb Yochanan himself slipped away when he saw the Friediker Rebbe coming, as he could not bear the thought of the Rebbe serving him.

Years later, Reb Yochanan wrote to the Friediker Rebbe about his own deliberations at the time and Reb Leib Sheinin's encouragement. He concluded the letter with a

poignant wish: "I hope that what I saw and heard and felt when I was at the *chasunah*, will remain with me forever."²

Rabbi Yisroel Gordon relates: "When I was younger my father would often tell me how he knows the Friediker Rebbe's children, from when they lived in Lubavitch as little girls; and he knows the Friediker Rebbe's mother, Rebbetzin Shterna Sarah; and he knew the Friediker Rebbe's grandmother, Rebbetzin Rivka, wife of the Rebbe Maharash. He would tell me how special they were.

"And then he would tell me about the new son-in-law, who years later became the Rebbe; this man, he said, is something very special. He is a great scholar in *nigleh* and in Chassidus, *kabbalah*; whatever you want, he is the master of it. He is a young man, and yet he knows *uhn a shiur*, without any limit. He knows everything and he does it all very, very quietly as if he is a plain person. He doesn't like to publicize things; the way he dresses



and the way he walks, the way he talks to people, it is all in a very humble and friendly way.”

Dangerous Birth

When Reb Yochanan’s wife became pregnant in her forties, the couple was worried about the fate of the child, being that she had previously miscarried a few times. She therefore traveled to nearby Vilna, where there was a hospital that could deal with the issue. The expectant mother was examined, and the doctor said that due to her situation, she should come to be admitted into the hospital when she is in her seventh or eighth month. Otherwise, she and the baby will be in serious jeopardy.

Upon arriving home, she shared the worrying news with her husband. He immediately called the Frierdiker Rebbe from the one telephone existing in Dokshitz to find out what to do. The answer that he received was that she should remain home and that the mother and the child will be healthy.

Sure enough, she gave birth to a healthy baby boy whom they called Yisroel—after Reb Yochanan’s father—who later grew to become the Rebbe’s shliach in Worcester, Massachusetts, and later in Morristown, New Jersey.

Moving to America

When Reb Yochanan was a young man, his older three brothers had moved to America, while he remained behind in Dokshitz to care for his aging parents. When his mother and then his father had passed on, his brothers encouraged him to make the move with his family, so that he



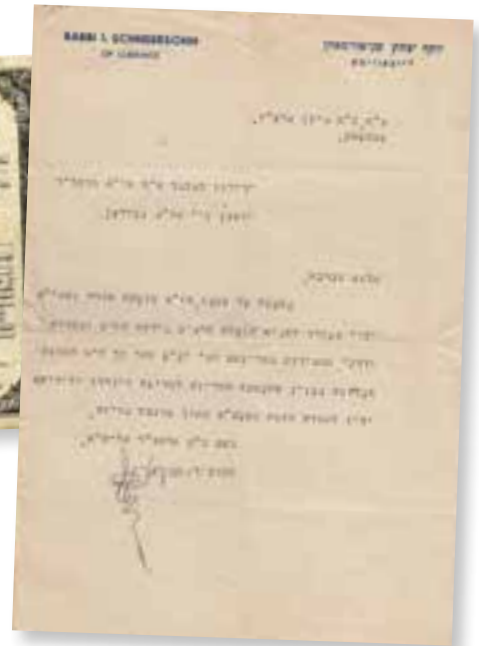
REB YOCHANAN'S CERTIFICATE OF US CITIZENSHIP.

wouldn't have to remain in Europe on his own. He resisted from making the trip, however, for he had heard that his nieces and nephews in the United States were not able to learn in good Jewish educational institutions, let alone *chassidische* ones, and that was not something he was about to compromise for his family.

When the Frierdiker Rebbe visited the United States in 5689 (תרפ"ט), Reb Yochanan’s brothers came for a *yechidus*, and the Frierdiker Rebbe asked them why their brother Yochanan had not joined them and made the journey to America.

The brothers explained to the Frierdiker Rebbe that Reb Yochanan does not want to come due to the sad state of Jewish education in *di goldene medina*. The Frierdiker Rebbe told them that he will instruct Reb Yochanan to go.

When Reb Yochanan visited the Frierdiker Rebbe in Tishrei 5691 (תרצ"א), the Frierdiker Rebbe told him to his surprise that he should move to the United States. When he told the Frierdiker Rebbe that he had heard that America is *eretz ocheles yoshveha*—it ‘consumes’ its inhabitants



A LETTER FROM THE FRIERDIKER REBBE TO REB YOCHANAN CONGRATULATING HIM ON RECEIVING HIS US CITIZENSHIP.

and the people that come there cool off of their Torah and mitzvos—the Frierdiker Rebbe replied by promising him that his children will remain *ehrlische Yidden*. Reb Yochanan was still hesitant. “I want my children to grow up as Chassidim,” he said. The Frierdiker Rebbe answered that they will grow up as Chassidim. Reb Yochanan still held back, saying that he wanted his children to be able to learn in the Rebbe’s yeshivos, which were nonexistent in the United States, and the Frierdiker Rebbe told him that his children will do so.

Armed with the blessing of the Frierdiker Rebbe, Reb Yochanan set out for the United States; first traveling there by himself, during Chanukah 5692 (תרצ"ב), and then joined by his family two years later, on Chai Elul 5694 (תרצ"ד). Rabbi Sholom Ber Gordon a”h later described the scene when his father, Reb Yochanan, left Dokshitz: “All the people from the town escorted him, and the town Jews cried like children,” as they watched him leave.

Sure to the Rebbe’s word, his children all followed in his path, and

SURE TO THE REBBE’S WORD, HIS CHILDREN ALL FOLLOWED IN HIS PATH, AND HIS SONS EVEN MERITED TO LEARN IN THE REBBE’S YESHIVOS.

his sons even merited to learn in the Rebbe's yeshivos. Nissan, the oldest, learned in Tomchei Temimim in Europe, and the rest of them merited to learn in the newly established yeshiva that the Frierdiker Rebbe

opened upon arrival in the United States.

Life in America was difficult. Reb Yochanan worked long hours as a *shochet*, but his hard life did not deter him from doing a Chossid's work.

Each night, on his way home from work, he would stop off at a shul in Brownsville, where he would teach Ein Yaakov to the Yidden gathered there.

In addition to his *shiurim* to men, in 5698 (תרח"צ) Reb Yochanan was appointed by the Frierdiker Rebbe as one of the *shloshes haro'im*—the three shepherds—to take responsibility for the daughters of Chabad Chassidim. A new group was formed called Achos Hatmimim, and the girls were given *shiurim* and experienced farbrengens with these Chassidim. This organization was extremely precious to the Frierdiker Rebbe, and he even asked⁴ to be notified of *shiurim* times.

Every Sunday, Reb Yochanan would give a *shiur* to the girls that learned in Beis Yaakov, an after school Talmud Torah at that time. They would come from Williamsburg, Boro Park, and Bensonhurst on a weekly basis, to learn about Chassidus and the Rabbeim. Those who participated still remember vividly how much they enjoyed those classes.

And in addition to all this, he also taught elderly Jews on a regular basis.

Even in his old age, the Rebbe insisted that Reb Yochanan continue giving the *shiurim* that he had started years earlier. When he complained to the Rebbe that his ears were failing

A True Chossid

Rabbi Yisroel Gordon relates:

“On the first night of Rosh Hashanah during one of the early years in America, the Frierdiker Rebbe davened Maariv in the *zal* at 770 for a lengthy period of time, long after the *minyan* was over.

“Chassidim recited Tehillim in their places, and the sound of the Rebbe's davening, accompanied by intense sobbing, was carried through the *zal*. The cloth on the Rebbe's *shtender* became entirely soaked with his holy tears, which came down without respite.

“After about three hours, the Frierdiker Rebbe finished his davening, wished everyone *'leshana tova tikasev vesechasem,*' and went up to his apartment. One of the Chassidim, who was a *bochur* in Lubavitch, hurried over to the Rebbe's *shtender* and wiped his face with the cloth, explaining his actions by quoting the saying that “דמעות מכבסות” - “tears wipe away *aveiros*.”⁵

““You are cleaning your *aveiros* with the Rebbe's tears?’ my father reprimanded him sharply. ‘You should be cleaning them with your own tears!’”

Reb Yochanan's *hiskashrus* was also expressed in his attitude to *yechidus*. Reb Yochanan once bemoaned that *yechidus* with the Rebbe requires an appointment three months in advance. Going in for *Yechidus* is something that comes from an inner urge, and isn't simply a visit to the Rebbe's room. When a person has such a need, how can he push it off for three months?



REB YOCHANAN SITS BEHIND THE REBBE DURING A FARBRENGEN IN THE 5720S.



him and he could no longer hear the questions that the attendees were asking him, the Rebbe told him that the important thing is that they should be able to hear what he is saying, not the other way around.

Very few Chassidim lived then in the United States, and Reb Yochanan's children have nostalgic memories of the *chassidische* farbrengens that took place in those years. Reb Yochanan's daughter, Esther Goldman a"h, related:

"With my father's occupation as a *shochet*, he would bring home livers and *miltzen* (spleen), and all sorts of 'delicacies,' which my mother would prepare, and the Chassidim would gather to farbreng. Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson, Rabbi Eliyahu Simpson, Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Kazarnovsky, and Rabbi Avner Shifrin were some of the Chassidim living in the area, and these farbrengens would be very special.

"When there were only a few Chassidim, we were all like one family. The farbrengens in our house often ended with crying, the *niggunim* were sung like real *chassidische* niggunim. It brought everyone into the frame of mind that a Chossid should be in."

Reb Yochanan kept up his connection with the Frierdiker Rebbe, who was in Europe, by means of letters. He would also send money to support the Frierdiker Rebbe's activities. In fact, there are letters from Rebbetzin Shterna Sarah to Reb Yochanan thanking him for the money he had sent for the yeshiva in Otwock, and asking him to encourage others to give as well.

WHEN WE CAME AND TOLD HIM THAT THE REBBE IS COMING, HE GOT UP AND STARTED JUMPING UP AND DOWN LIKE A SMALL CHILD; HE LOVED THE REBBE WITH ALL HIS HEART AND SOUL.



REB YOCHANAN STANDS AT HIS FIXED SPOT TO THE LEFT OF THE BAAL KOREH AS THE REBBE RECEIVES AN ALIYA.

JEM 103723

The Frierdiker Rebbe Arrives

The close relationship with the Frierdiker Rebbe continued when the Frierdiker Rebbe arrived in the United States on Tes Adar Sheini 5700 and throughout the years that followed.

Mrs. Esther Goldman related:

"When we were notified that our Rebbe would be coming to America, my father was again sick with tonsillitis; he was burning with fever. When we came and told him that the Rebbe is coming, he got up and started jumping up and down like a small child. He was a very emotional person and this was how he expressed himself. He loved the Rebbe with all his heart and soul."

L'alter L'teshuvah

In 5702, the Frierdiker Rebbe announced a campaign calling for

L'alter L'teshuvah, L'alter L'geulah— immediate repentance brings immediate redemption. The campaign came as an answer to the terrible tragedies that were befalling the Yidden in Europe, which the Frierdiker Rebbe called *chevlei Moshiach*, and now was the time for Moshiach to come.

Reb Yochanan's *hiskashrus* to the Frierdiker Rebbe was so powerful that he cashed in his life insurance policy, worth two thousand dollars (a considerable amount of money at the time), and gave all of it to the Frierdiker Rebbe to use it for the campaign. His reasoning was simple; who needs life insurance, if Moshiach is about to come?

This endearing faithfulness was also evident in the trust and closeness that the Frierdiker Rebbe showed him. On one occasion, the Frierdiker Rebbe was farbrenging in his apartment on the second floor of 770 and Reb Yochanan stood next to him. Because the crowd was pushing to get closer, Reb Yochanan began to fear that he was getting too close to the Frierdiker Rebbe's personal space, and he began to call out in worry. At that moment, the Frierdiker Rebbe turned to him

Lubavitch ShebeLubavitch

On 13 Nissan 5711, a few short weeks after the Rebbe took on the *nesius*, the Rebbe wrote a letter to Reb Yochanan, expressing his *nachas ruach* for the work he was doing.⁹

“I am observing your activities in a number of areas that the [Frierdiker] Rebbe placed on your shoulders, and I take pleasure seeing that now too, you continue your good work in those areas. Surely you will add even more to your efforts, and without a doubt, Hashem will provide you with the necessary strength, for Hashem does not demand from an individual more than he is capable of.”

Later, the Rebbe continues to extoll the great merit for those that do the Rebbe’s work, especially regarding his activities as the *gabbai* in the Shul of 770 (Lubavitch shebeLubavitch), his involvement in *maamad*, and *maos chitim*. The letter ends with a *bracha* for his health, and the health of his wife, and that he should see *chassidische nachas* from all of his children and grandchildren.

and told him, “Yochanan, You don’t make me uncomfortable”.

Another expression of his closeness is seen in the fact that on several occasions the Frierdiker Rebbe chose Reb Yochanan to replace him as *chazan* on the *yahrtzeit* of his grandmother, Rebbetzin Rivkah, and on the *yahrtzeit* of the Frierdiker Rebbe’s uncle, the Raz”a; on that occasion, the Frierdiker Rebbe even noted it in his diary.⁶

Gabbai in 770

In 5707, Reb Yochanan was appointed to serve as the *gabbai* of 770, a position he held until his passing in 5729. As a result of this position, Reb Yochanan merited to be around the Rebbe quite often. In 5725, when the Rebbe davened at the *amud* after the *histalkus* of his mother, Rebbetzin Chana, Reb Yochanan never missed a *tefillah*. In general, 770 was

always filled with his happy and witty presence, and the sharp comments that always seemed to be on the tip of his tongue. He would often use these to bring a smile to the Rebbe’s face.

On one occasion, Reb Yochanan saw that all of the *bochurim* standing in the small *zal* were trying to look at the Rebbe, who had gone to the sink at the end of the hallway to wash *negel vasser*. He asked them loudly, “What do you think, that your coats will get stolen?” The Rebbe returned to his room with a broad smile.

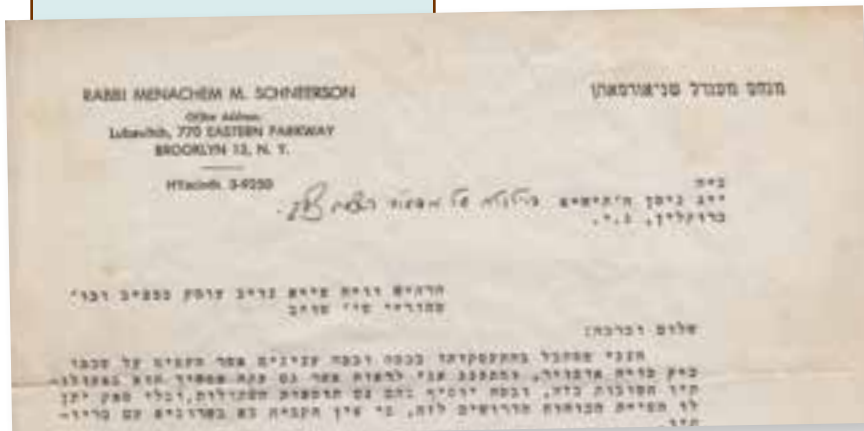
In addition to his duties as *gabbai*, he also served as the Rebbe’s *baal koreh* until 5715, when he felt that his voice was weakening and he gave the job to Reb Mottel Shusterman. Additionally, he was also appointed to be the head of *Chevras Bikkur Cholim*, which the Frierdiker Rebbe created (in 5704) as one of the activities of *Machne Israel*, to care for the physical and spiritual needs of injured and ailing *Yidden*.



Vzarah Hashemesh

Early Shabbos morning, Reb Yochanan would go to the mikveh, and on his way back home he would stop off in 770 to make sure everything was ready for the davening later on. On Shabbos Yud Shevat 5710, Reb Yochanan was on his way to 770 when someone broke the terrible news to him, that the Frierdiker Rebbe was *nistalek*. He continued on to 770, and at some point went back to his house. Rabbi Shimon Goldman, Reb Yochanan’s son-in-law relates:

“On that Shabbos my wife and I had come to visit and we were staying by my in-laws. The house was on Eastern Parkway, and from the living room window it was possible to see the people entering and exiting 770. When my father-in-law returned, I was standing by the window and I saw from his facial expression that something terrible had happened;



even before he had entered the house. His face was terrifying; he was white as a ghost, he held his hands together and told us, “*Oy vey, oy vey, we have lost our father*”.

A regular person cannot comprehend the feelings of a Chossid at the *histalkus* of his Rebbe. Reb Yochanan was completely broken. The inner *hiskashrus* and profound love he felt for the Frierdiker Rebbe, caused the *histalkus* to break his heart and soul. Nevertheless, the Chassidim immediately looked toward the Rebbe for inspiration and guidance and implored from him to accept the *nesius*, but the Rebbe would dismiss their requests, instead saying with great emotion that the Frierdiker Rebbe is still giving *hashp'ah*.

After the *levaya*, Reb Yochanan told his son Sholom Ber that he is afraid of an *ayin hara*. He had taken part in the *tahara*, and had been granted, by means of a raffle, the job of *roshoi kesem paz*. During the *tahara* of the Magid of Mezritch, the Alter Rebbe had received the same job, and had worried about an *ayin hara*. Therefore, Reb Yochanan said, he is terribly worried and afraid.

A short time later, Reb Yochanan's wife became very ill. His children hid the grim prognosis from their father. One day he met the Rebbe, who asked him how his wife was doing. Reb Yochanan told the Rebbe that the doctors want to do an operation,

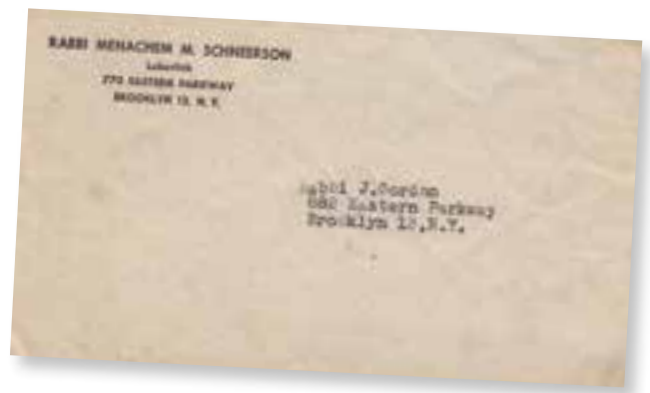
and implying that the Rebbe had been refusing to take on the *nesius*, despite requests from the Chassidim added “but there is no one to ask for advice...” The Rebbe answered that he needs to ask the Frierdiker Rebbe, and the Frierdiker Rebbe will surely find a way to answer him.

When Reb Yochanan's children heard about what the Rebbe had said, they entered the Rebbe's room, and disclosed what the doctors had seen. The Rebbe told them to go through with the operation and gave his *bracha*. Sure enough it was successful and she lived for several more years. When she passed away in 5717, the Rebbe came to Reb Yochanan's house to be *menachem avel* the family.

Continual Hiskashrus

Immediately following the Frierdiker Rebbe's *histalkus*, Reb Yochanan accepted the Rebbe as his Rebbe, and was *mekasher* himself to the Rebbe with the same dedication and love that he had felt towards the Frierdiker Rebbe.

Reb Yochanan immediately stopped shaking the Rebbe's hand, as Chassidim do not shake hands with their Rebbe. During the same time



period, one of Reb Yochanan's sons, Sholom Ber went into the Rebbe's room together with one of his young children, and the Rebbe held out his hand towards the child, but the child refused to shake it. The Rebbe responded, “*Oy gevald!* the child already doesn't want to shake my hand...”

In his position as *gabbai* of 770, he merited, on the Shabbos after Yud Shvat 5711, to call the Rebbe up to the Torah as *Adoneinu Moreinu V'Rabeinu* for *maftir*, the aliya customarily reserved for the Rabbeim.

Chassidim recall how Reb Yochanan would call up the Rebbe every year on Simchas Torah for *Chosson Bereishis*, when he would say the Frierdiker Rebbe's name alongside the Rebbe's. During those early years, Reb Yochanan would recite the *nusach* while crying with emotion. He even wrote down the names of the Rebbe and the Frierdiker Rebbe in his *siddur*, so that he would not stumble over them due to the intense emotions that would well up inside of him during the recital.

Since Reb Yochanan was a *shochet*, he merited to *shecht* the Rebbe's *kaparos* chicken every year on Erev Yom Kippur. However, that job came with an additional obligation: The Rebbe instructed that the one that began the work on Erev Yom Kippur in the morning should complete it, and therefore the *shochet* should be the one to administer *malkos* to the Rebbe. As a Chossid, this part of the



job was understandably very hard for him to do, and each year he would be overwhelmed with intense anxiety for hours beforehand.

The Gemach

The financial situation of most of the Yidden in the New York area during those early years in America left much to be desired. The country was weighed down under the effect of the Great Depression, which occurred in 1929, and tremendous amounts of people were left without work. This situation was all the worse for immigrants, who did not speak the language, and especially bad for those that insisted on keeping Shabbos,

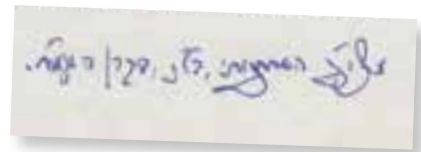
which was considered a regular work day.

This situation led a number of concerned individuals to open a *gemach* called Gemilas Chesed Shomrei Shabbos, which would lend out small sums of money to *frumme* Yidden that had fallen into hardships. Reb Yochanan was brought in as a member of the committee and eventually it became entirely his responsibility.

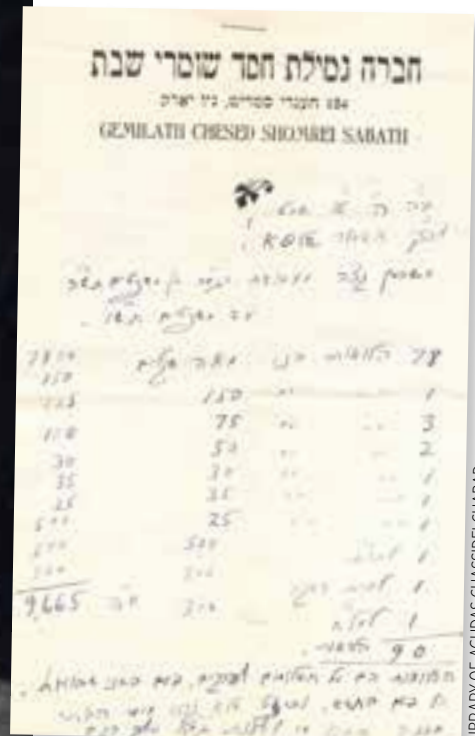
The Frierdiker Rebbe would receive a yearly report from Reb Yochanan about the work of the *gemach*, and he would also donate on a yearly basis, as well as encourage him in *yechidusen* and letters about the good work that was being done.

After the *histalkus* of the Frierdiker Rebbe, Reb Yochanan entered the Rebbe's room, and with his typical *chassidische breitheit*, he asked the Rebbe if he would allow the *gemach* to be under the Rebbe's *nesius*, and the Rebbe agreed (something that the Rebbe almost never allowed for existing *mosdos*). In addition, the Rebbe continued the Frierdiker Rebbe's tradition of annual donations, changing the amount each year (perhaps so as to not create a *chazakah*). The Rebbe would also send yearly letters to the *melaveh malkah* that would be held in honor of the *gemach*.

Alongside the encouragement, the Rebbe constantly demanded from the



POSTSCRIPT ON THE REBBE'S LETTER TO REB YOCHANAN [מצורף פה] השתתפותי, "מצו"פ [=מצורף פה] השתתפותי, "בל"ג [=בבלי נדר], בקרן הגמ"ח."



A REPORT DETAILING THE ACTIVITIES OF THE GEMACH SENT BY REB YOCHANAN TO THE FRIERDIKER REBBE.

LIBRARY OF AGUDAS CHASSIDEI CHABAD

REB YOCHANAN WASN'T JUST A COLLECTOR OF STORIES; HE WAS ALSO A MASTER STORYTELLER, WHO WITH HIS WIT AND SMILING COUNTEenance WOULD BRING A SMILE TO THE FACES OF ALL HIS LISTENERS

gemach's management to widen the scope of their activities. Once, during that early period, the Rebbe asked Reb Yochanan if there was any money left in the account. Reb Yochanan explained to the Rebbe that he always leaves a small amount of money in case a donor needed his money back. The Rebbe was not satisfied with this arrangement, and he told Reb Yochanan to lend out everything he possibly could.

Exceptional Kindness

The *gemach* was only one expression of Reb Yochanan's unique sense of caring and sensitivity. The following episode gives us a glimpse into his extraordinary *chassidische midos tovos*.

One summer evening, when the temperature reached above ninety degrees, after he finished his backbreaking job at the *shlachthoiz*, Reb Yochanan took buses and subways to an apartment building in Brownsville. There, he climbed a number of flights of stairs to the apartment of an old woman, to pick up two or three dollars that she had saved up for *maamad*; the traditional fund supporting the Rebbe's household.

This was a trip he would make periodically. Ever since the woman

had complained to him that she is too weak to come deliver the money herself, he took upon himself to go pick it up from her, the hassle notwithstanding.

Reb Yochanan's children protested strongly. They said they would fill in those few dollars, as long as he would desist from the journey, which they reasoned, was very damaging to his fragile health. But Reb Yochanan would not give in. He told them that he wasn't *shlepping* there for the money. He was going there because of the forgotten old woman, who lived alone.

"You should see the look on her face when I show up in her home," he told his children.

A *Shtreimel* and a Torah

On two Shabbosim each year, Reb Yochanan would stand up to make announcements during the Rebbe's *farbrengen*. The first would be on Shabbos Bereishis, when the *minhag* is that the *gabbai* sells all of the "mitzvos" for the coming year—who will pay for the *ner lama'or*, and all of the other needs of the shul. Before conducting the bids, the Rebbe would instruct Reb Yochanan to stand up on the table, don a *shtreimel*, and tell the crowd a *chassidische maise*.

Similarly, on Shabbos Parshas Mishpatim, in which the Torah says "*Im kesef talveh es ami—you shall lend money to my people*," Reb Yochanan would stand up to invite all of the attendees to the *gemach's melaveh malkah*, that Motzaei Shabbos. Then too, after he would make his announcement, he would put on a *shtreimel*, and delight the crowd with a *vertel*.

When Reb Yochanan would speak, the pleasure on the Rebbe's face was evident; it would be the only time,

during *farbrengens*, where the Rebbe would lean back on his chair while listening closely to the story. There were even occasions that the Rebbe himself corrected or added to the story that was being told. After Reb Yochanan's passing, this tradition was continued each Parshas Mishpatim by his son-in-law, Reb Shimon Goldman⁷, who took over the *gemach*, and each Shabbos Bereishis by the new *gabbai*, Reb Shea Pinson.

Reb Yochanan was a treasure trove of stories and *vertlach* of Chassidim and Rabbeim of the previous generations, and he did not keep the information to himself. Many of the stories that we know today about Chassidim of old, Reb Hillel Paritcher and many others, were told over by Reb Yochanan who heard them in Lubavitch from the *meshpia* Reb Shmuel Gronem Esterman.

In 5717, when the Rebbe instructed Kovetz Lubavitch⁸ to send out questionnaires for Chassidim to write about their memories about *der alter heim*, Reb Yochanan replied enthusiastically with much information about Chassidic life in Dokshitz and about the Chassidim that lived there. The Rebbe asked that the editors of the Kovetz send Reb Yochanan additional forms so that he would have enough space to write his extensive memories and recollections.

Reb Yochanan wasn't just a collector of stories; he was also a master storyteller, who with his wit and smiling countenance would bring a smile to the faces of all his listeners.

On one memorable occasion, Reb Yochanan felt faint in the midst of the Rebbe's *farbrengen*, and had to be carried outside where, after a short rest, he came to his senses and felt better. Not wanting the Rebbe to worry about his condition, he stood in the foyer of 770 as the Rebbe was returning to his room. When the Rebbe passed him, he looked at



Reb Yochanan and gestured to him, waiting to hear how he was doing.

“I was *niftar* from the world,” Reb Yochanan told the Rebbe. “But *Gehinom* is closed on Shabbos, and *Gan Eden* didn’t want to let me in. So here I am!”

Upon hearing this ‘report,’ the Rebbe entered his room with a broad smile.

In 5729, when Reb Yochanan got up to speak at the farbrengen, once again, a *shtreimel* could not be found. The Rebbe took the cloth napkin that was covering the cake on the table, and threw it to Reb Yochanan to wear on his head. As it turned out, that was his last time speaking at the farbrengen, as that year, on 29 Menachem Av he departed from this world. **T**

1. It is interesting to note that a similar idea was expressed by the Frierdiker Rebbe during the *chasunah* itself. See Sefer Hama’amrim Admur Rayatz 5689 (תרפ”ט) p. 80.
2. Mibeis Hagnozim p. 370.
3. Sefer Hashichos Admur Rayatz 5691 (תרצ”א), p. 168.
4. Igros Kodesh Admur Rayatz, Vol 4, p. 399.
5. Quoted in Chassidus based on Zohar vol. III 75b.
6. Mibeis Hagnozim p. 51.
7. See the farbrengen of Mishpatim 5752, where the Rebbe calls up Rabbi Shimon Goldman to make the annual announcement and connects his name “Shimon” to the ‘going up’ from *golus* to *geulah* which is emphasized in the saying of *Razal ‘Reuvan veshimon salkin.’* Sefer Hashichos 5752, p. 372, footnote 103.
8. See more about Kovetz Lubavitch in A Chassidisher Derher Issue 35 (112) - Elul 5775.
9. Igros Kodesh, Vol 4, p. 251.

”May you merit to see”

In 5721, Rebbetzin Chana gave Reb Yochanan a donation for 770. Sending her a “receipt” letter, he used the opportunity to give over two *chassidische* stories. He wrote to her as follows:

Chassidim would tell over:

When the Baal Shem Tov organized the *avodah* of the Yidden according to times and occasions, it was set that Erev Yom Kippur, during the time of *mincha*, was a time for *teshuvah tata’ah*, when one makes a *cheshbon hanefesh* of all of his actions over the previous year. In order for this *cheshbon hanefesh* to be a *cheshbon tzedek*, one needs peace and quiet in order that he should not be bothered.

The *mispaelim* in the *beis medrash* of the Baal Shem Tov wanted to stop the custom of ‘plates’ [for collecting *tzedakah*] on Erev Yom Kippur, because it disturbs their concentration. But when they brought their idea to the Baal Shem Tov, he reprimanded them and said:

“What do you think—that by banging your hand on your chest you will confuse the *Satan hamekatreg*?

“No! Rather by throwing coins into the plates, you will create noise that will confuse the *Satan.*”

2. Once, during a farbrengen of the Frierdiker Rebbe—I think it was Yud Kislev—one of the *ziknei anash* by the name of Mr. Prodinsky was present, and he wished, while saying *l’chaim*, that Hashem should give *yeshuos*—salvations—to *klal Yisrael*.

The Frierdiker Rebbe answered him that it should be “one *yeshua*, and a correct one.”

Reb Yochanan finishes off the letter with a wish from the depth of his heart:

“May you merit to see your son, who is from the family of Dovid Hamelech, revealed as the leader of *klal Yisrael* (and the *goel Yisrael*).”