

INTERVIEWS: RABBI LEVI GREENBERG (OH)
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Memories

WITH

Rebbetzin Chana

INTERVIEW WITH
**RABBI AND MRS. LEIBEL
AND DVONYA ALEVSKY**

Rabbi Leibel and Mrs. Dvonya Alevsky have been the Rebbe's Shluchim to Northeast Ohio for more than 50 years, and have transformed the Jewish landscape in Cleveland and beyond. There was so much we could discuss with the Alevskys about their life and shlichus,¹ but in this conversation we focused on one special aspect of their lives: the relationship they enjoyed with the Rebbe's mother, Rebbetzin Chana.

לזכות ילדינו היקרים יצחק צבי,
מנחם מענדל, אברהם מאיר,
יהודית, וישראל ארי' לייב שיחיו
שיגדלו להיות חסידים
יראי שמים ולמדנים

נדפס ע"י
הרה"ת ר' אליעזר זזוגתו מרת חנה שיחיו
וואלף



Rabbi Leibel Alevsky was born in Ukraine; he emigrated with his mother during the “Great Escape” of Chassidim from Russia in 5706-7² (his father had been killed in World War II), and after some time in a DP (displaced persons) camp and then in Paris, moved to Kfar Chabad in 5709 as per the instruction of the Frierdiker Rebbe. After spending some time in Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim in Lod, he arrived in New York to be near the Rebbe and learn at 770 on Rosh Chodesh Sivan 5718.

Mrs. Dvonya Alevsky was born in Russia, and left on the same series of trains with her family as well as hundreds of other Chassidim. They also spent a few years in DP camps and Paris, ultimately arriving in the United States in 5713. Soon after, they moved to Cleveland on the Rebbe’s instruction and by the recommendation of HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society).

Rabbi Alevsky shares his earliest memories of Rebbetzin Chana: “On Yom Tov, the Rebbetzin would come to 770 and daven. After Davening, she would go with the Rebbe into his room for several minutes. Afterwards, they would leave together, as hundreds of people awaited them outside. The Rebbe would walk her out of 770, with his right hand linked under her left, until about the middle of 788 Eastern Parkway (the second apartment building after 770), where she would be met by two women (Mrs. Kazarnovsky and another woman). The Rebbe would watch his mother and her entourage until they were out of sight. When she turned the block and was hidden by the building, the Rebbe would turn around and walk briskly back to his room. The whole scene was very majestic, like a king escorting the queen...”

After several years of learning in 770, in Cheshvan of 5722, Rabbi Alevsky was recruited to work in Tzach (Lubavitch Youth Organization). The day he began his work, he was approached by his new boss, Reb Dovid Raskin. “Reb Dovid told me that he would like to introduce me to Rebbetzin Chana. Rebbetzin Chana had a special affection for Tzach, because unlike the other Chabad *mosdos* (established by the Frierdiker Rebbe or others), it was founded by the Rebbe himself. Reb Dovid wanted to give her some *nachas* so he decided to bring me to her, and to inform her that I would be opening the first official office of Tzach.

“After that, I began helping the Rebbetzin around the house with various things. I became a regular there; whenever there was something to fix in the house and the like (e.g. to buy some things for her), she would call me and I’d come and take care of it.

“Twice a year, on Yud-Aleph Nissan and Chof Av, she would hold a farbrengen in her apartment with elder Chassidim. She would sit at the head of the table, slanted towards the right. She would have a cup of wine for L’chaim in front of her, and would listen as the Chassidim recounted memories of



REB LEIBEL ALEVSKY (STANDING SECOND FROM RIGHT) AS THE REBBE SITS DOWN FOR A SHORT FARBRENGEN WITH ELDER CHASSIDIM IN THE FRIERDIKER REBBE’S APARTMENT, 19 KISLEV 5722.

her husband, Harav Levi Yitzchok, occasionally interjecting with factual corrections.

“I would be in the kitchen and would help with whatever she needed, I would set the table beforehand with *mashke*, wine and cookies.

“On one of these occasions, one Chossid on her right was telling a story about Harav Levi Yitzchok. Another elder Chossid on the left (who had more of an outspoken personality) interjected, saying that he also remembered the event. The Rebbetzin ignored him (I thought maybe she didn’t hear him), but when the first Chossid finished, she turned to the second one and said ‘*Yeh, Reb (ploni), vos hot ir gevolt zogen?*’ (Yes, Reb (so-and-so), what did you want to say?)’ This is just one example of how she shared many mannerisms with the Rebbe. She was fully present, wherever she was.

“Once, when I was there at a farbrengen, the Rebbetzin requested that her husband’s niggun be sung. Nobody remembered how it started, so she said, ‘*Alevsky iz in kich, ruft em, er vet gedeinken* (Alevsky is in the kitchen, call him, he will remember)’. They called me out and I started the niggun.

“As part of my duties, I was organizing various events, and sending out letters promoting them etc. Whenever I would write a letter for Tzach, I would bring it to the Rebbe with

a carbon copy. The Rebbe would often write comments and notes on the carbon copy and return them within several minutes. Thus, the Rebbe remained up to date on all Tzach's activities.

"Once, I accumulated some twenty letters, with a number of letters acknowledging receipt of some interesting letters from chaplains, senators, heads of colleges, and the like (if a letter was being sent to acknowledge receipt, I would send the original letter to the Rebbe as well). Whenever interesting things came in, I would bring them to Rebbetzin Chana, since I knew that she enjoyed reading them.

"That day, I sent the package of letters into the Rebbe's room, planning on bringing it to Rebbetzin Chana as soon as it came back. I waited for a while, but the package did not come back out.

"The Rebbe would usually give written responses to letters four times a day: In the morning, from the bag he would bring from home, before Mincha, before Maariv, and then finally, when Rabbi Hodakov would enter the Rebbe's room at the end of the day, right before the Rebbe would go home for the night.

"Having brought the letters at 11 a.m., I expected to get them back at Mincha time. Nothing came out then, so I figured I would get them back before Maariv, but again, they did not come out. I was certain that they would finally come out at night, but yet again, they did not.

"The next morning, I got a call from Rabbi Binyomin Klein: 'Your package is back.'

"I rushed over from my office, and I told Rabbi Klein that I expected that the Rebbe had written many comments, as I could not imagine why else the Rebbe would have kept it for

so long. I opened the package, only to discover that the Rebbe had not left a single note. I was quite perplexed.

"Later that day, I brought the package over to Rebbetzin Chana's house and showed it to her. She looked at the letters and half-smiled. I asked her, 'Rebbetzin, what is the problem?' She replied, '*Ich veis nit tzi ich zol dir zogen* (I'm not sure if I should tell you)...'. To which I responded, 'Rebbetzin, if you weren't sure you wanted to tell me, you wouldn't have said that either...'

"She burst out laughing (I had never seen her laugh like that before), and said, 'Last night the Rebbe already showed these to me...'

Mrs. Alevsky: "My family had a longstanding connection with the Rebbetzin. My grandmother, Mummeh Sarah (Katzenelnbogen), was deeply involved in the great escape of Chassidim from Russia in 5706-7, and she helped Rebbetzin Chana get out as well.

"One story from that ordeal: The Rebbetzin refused to lie and declare the name on her false passport in order to leave. The problem was that as soon as the Rebbetzin would say her last name, Schneerson, she could be arrested immediately. So my grandmother accompanied her for the first leg of the journey, from Moscow to Lvov from where the trains out of Russia were leaving.

"She bought first-class tickets for them, wrapped a huge kerchief around the Rebbetzin's head, and told her to sit in a corner of the compartment and pretend to sleep. Meanwhile, my grandmother started an intense game of chess with another passenger, as some other people gathered to watch.

"The conductor eventually showed up and asked everyone for their ticket and passport. When he approached the Rebbetzin, he asked, 'What is your name, *babushka*?' My grandmother called out to him, 'The *babushka* is old and frail. Please leave her alone. I have her passport and ticket here.'

"The conductor insisted, 'I want her to tell me her name.' But the other passengers protested, 'Can't you leave her alone? We're in the middle of a game here, and you're mixing us up.' Finally he left the Rebbetzin alone.

"When we got to New York, we visited the Rebbetzin and she told us that when my grandmother sat down to play chess in first class, it seemed strange. '...But then I realized how brilliant she was. She saved my life, because if the conductor had insisted on knowing my name, I would have told him the truth, that I am Chana Schneerson, which would have been a death sentence at that time. She managed to distract attention from a vulnerable old lady, also protecting our suitcases (in which the Rebbetzin had brought the *ksovim* of her holy husband, Harav Levi Yitzchok) from being stolen by other passengers."

Mrs. Alevsky herself grew up in Cleveland, and went to school at the Hebrew Academy of Cleveland until ninth



ONE OF THE LETTERS PREPARED BY REB LEIBEL ALEVSKY ON TZACH STATIONARY. THE LETTER CONCERNS THE PRINTING OF THE SECOND VOLUME OF LIKKUTEI SICHOV AND THE REBBE MADE SEVERAL COMMENTS ON THE SIDE.

grade, after which she went to Beis Yaakov in New York. When she approached 10th grade, Hebrew Academy opened a high school and she went back home until graduation.

“During my year in New York, I remember seeing Rebbetzin Chana and saying ‘Gut Shabbos’ to her on the corner of Kingston and President, near her apartment, where she would often stand. I also remember standing in 770 and hearing people say that the Rebbetzin was about to come, and people greeting her there. When I came back to Crown Heights for seminary, I had similar interactions with her. But a more significant relationship with her began later that year.

“That year, I went home to Cleveland for Pesach. Before I returned to New York, my mother told me that when she had previously been in New York, she had given the Rebbe a list of *bochurim* for my shidduch, and that the Rebbe had picked out Leibel Alevsky. She said that I should speak to Reb Dovid Raskin, who would arrange a meeting.

“At this point I met the Rebbetzin again. When I came back, Reb Dovid approached me and said that the Rebbetzin needed someone to stay with her to be present in case of necessity, as her usual helper had left for Pesach and not yet returned; I agreed. I would come every night at 7 and leave in the morning to go to seminary. I don’t remember doing much for the Rebbetzin, since I was only there at night.

“Once, I came and another lady opened the door. I walked in and saw a room full of women [representatives of N’shei Chabad, who had come to invite the Rebbetzin to the N’shei Chabad convention]; the Rebbetzin told the other women that ‘*Ale meidelach vos helfen mir hoben a zechus az zei veren bald kallah* (All the girls who help me have a *zechus*, that they become a Kallah quickly)’. This was when I was already meeting my future husband.

“On the Sunday of the convention, the Rebbe spoke to the ladies of the convention in the upstairs *zal*, after which the ladies were able to pass the Rebbe for a short *yechidus*-like encounter. My mother passed by and spoke a few words to the Rebbe, after which my husband-to-be gave us a ride to bring my mother to the bus station to go back to Cleveland.

“When I got back, I went to the Rebbetzin’s apartment as usual. I rang the bell, and nobody answered, which was strange, since the Rebbetzin would usually open the door right away. I waited a few minutes and rang again; the door still didn’t open. I was quite baffled, because I didn’t expect anything out of the ordinary. After the third ring, the door opened, and the Rebbe was on the other side! That shocked me... The Rebbe saw me, smiled, and asked, ‘*Iz di mamme noch duh* (Is your mother still here)?’ (The Rebbe knew that my mother was supposed to travel back to Cleveland.) I answered the Rebbe that she had already gone back to Cleveland. The Rebbe smiled and walked back to the table where his mother was sitting, and I entered the hallway and went to



REBBETZIN CHANA (THIRD FROM LEFT) LISTENING TO ONE OF THE YOUNG MEMBERS OF NSHEI CHABAD SPEAK AT A CONVENTION.

my room. After the Rebbe left, I came out of my room, and the Rebbetzin gave me a broad smile and asked, ‘Nu? Nu?’ (as in, what do you say about the Rebbe opening the door?) She then said that she wasn’t feeling well, and the Rebbe had come for a special visit. If I would’ve known the Rebbe was there, I wouldn’t have come during that time.

“I stayed with the Rebbetzin for about a month. Around Shavuos time we decided to ask the Rebbe for a *bracha* to get engaged. After we got engaged, we went to meet the Rebbetzin as *chossan* and *kallah*. When the Rebbetzin opened the door, my husband let me go in first, and I started to walk in. But the Rebbetzin didn’t move. She smiled and said, ‘*Bei unz Chassidim, der man geit freier* (By us Chassidim, the man goes first)...’”

Rabbi Alevsky: “The next time my wife stayed there was a year later, when we were expecting our oldest daughter Sarah, who was born on 6 Menachem Av 5723. On Rosh Chodesh Av, my wife went to stay with the Rebbetzin, as the Rebbetzin’s helper had to leave.”

Mrs. Alevsky: “When I stayed with her this time, I was also asked to cook for her. It was during the nine days, yet the Rebbetzin instructed me to buy ground meat and make meatballs. She said, ‘You and I will eat together, because you are pregnant and you need strength, and *fleish git shtarkeit* (meat gives strength), and I’m an elderly woman, and I need strength as well.’ She also said that either Reb Dovid Raskin or Reb Berel Junik would come to make a *siyum*. If I remember correctly, one of them came one day, and the other came a different day.

“When I washed the dishes, I didn’t know where to get a towel to use for drying them. She told me it was in the

drawer. The first towel I took out had blue markings, and the Rebbetzin told me that ‘*Bloi iz far milchig* (Blue is for *milchig*), look at the next towel, that one is *roit* (red), that’s for *fleishig*.’

Rabbi Alevsky: “My wife slept there Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Overnight Wednesday, my wife didn’t sleep much and was tossing and turning the whole night. Apparently the Rebbetzin realized, and on Thursday morning she called me and said, ‘*Nem tzu dein veib fun mir, zi vet noch duh hoben dem kind* (Take your wife away from me, she will have the baby here)...’ Knowing that if my wife left, there would be nobody to replace her, I said, ‘Rebbetzin, I can’t imagine a better place for my child to be born...’ She didn’t react, and since the Rebbetzin had nobody else to stay with her, my wife remained the following night as well. Friday morning, the Rebbetzin called again and said, ‘I will not take a wife away from her husband for Shabbos. Take her home and don’t give me any excuses...’ So I came over and took her home.

“Before she left, she made up with the Rebbetzin that she would come over on Shabbos afternoon at 4:00 PM to help clean up after the Rebbe came over for Kiddush. In those years the Rebbe would daven in his room after the minyan finished, and then leave for home at around 3:00. On his way home he would visit his mother and make Kiddush for her.

“We ended up going to the hospital at 9:00 on Shabbos morning. The baby was born fairly quickly, and I was able to walk back to 770 from the hospital in time to see the Rebbe leave on his way to meet his mother. When the Rebbe came down the steps, I told the Rebbe that my wife had given birth to a girl. The Rebbe said *Mazel Tov*, and then I told the Rebbe

that we want to name our daughter after my wife’s grandmother, ‘Mummeh Sarah’. The Rebbe said, ‘*A gleiche zach, un zolstu geben a nomen heint tzu Mincha* (It is appropriate, and you should name her today at [Krias HaTorah of] Mincha.’ At the time, this was unusual. People generally waited to name their daughter on the following Shabbos morning, I was one of the first to do so). The Rebbe then continued to walk towards his mother’s house.

“At 4:00, I came to the Rebbetzin’s house. I had prepared a whole speech apologizing on behalf of my wife for being unable to come... I knocked on the door, and the Rebbetzin opened, and before I could say anything, she said ‘*Mazel Tov!*’ Afterward, I went inside and cleaned up.”

Mrs. Alevsky: “Right after Shabbos, I called the Rebbetzin, and she wished me a hearty *Mazel tov*, and told me that ‘*Mein zun hot mir shoin dertzeit* (My son already told me).”

“Before we got married, the Rebbetzin gave a check for \$15 as a wedding gift, a large sum in those days. When our daughter was born, she gave us another check for double the amount and said, ‘I realized that you didn’t deposit the last check that I gave you for your wedding. Now I’m giving you double, to buy something for your daughter.’

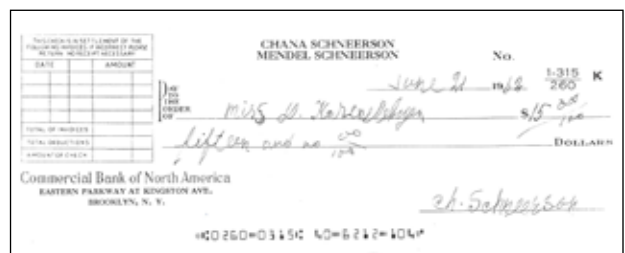
Rabbi Alevsky: “The Rebbetzin needed to go to a specific doctor once a month (at an office on Eastern Parkway and Washington, near Grand Army Plaza). Since I had a car, my wife and I would drive the Rebbetzin to her appointments. When we got there, I would remain in the car and my wife would walk the Rebbetzin up the stairs to the doctor’s office; when they were done, they would come out and we would drive home together.”

Mrs. Alevsky: “I remember how on one of those trips, when I was pregnant, the Rebbetzin complimented me on my dress, and said that it looked nice, asking where I bought it.

“There are several other fond memories I recall about Rebbetzin Chana. One Yom Tov night, before I got married, I was standing with some friends on Eastern Parkway and we saw the Rebbe and Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka walking Rebbetzin Chana back home from 770 after a Yom Tov meal (when Rebbetzin Chana would eat at the Friediker Rebbe’s apartment on the second floor of 770).



LAST KNOWN PHOTO OF REBBETZIN CHANA. LAG B’OMER 5723.



THE CHECK GIVEN BY REBBETZIN CHANA.



THE REBBE AT THE KEVURAH OF REBBETZIN CHANA, 6 TISHREI 5725.

“Rebbetzin Chana tried to make conversation all the time. Once, the Rebbetzin asked me whether I read her *Zichronos*’ which were serialized at the time in the ‘Di Yiddishe Heim’ magazine.

“Vov Tishrei occurred over a year after our daughter Sarah was born. That Shabbos, I wanted to bring her to Rebbetzin Chana. She was already walking, so I took her to President Street on Shabbos afternoon. As I approached, I encountered a woman who was the Rebbetzin’s next door neighbor; she asked me whether I heard what happened. As she is asking me, I see Dr. Seligson running from 770 to the Rebbetzin’s apartment. This woman then told me that overnight, Mrs. Wiener, the Rebbetzin’s helper, had knocked on her door. (As a side note, I was the one that suggested her name to Reb Dovid Raskin to hire her to help the Rebbetzin.) Mrs. Wiener told her that the Rebbetzin had fallen, and she asked this neighbor to go and quickly notify the Rebbe. In the meantime I see people running to and fro, and I realized that I wouldn’t be seeing the Rebbetzin. So I walked back home with my daughter. After Shabbos, we heard the news...”

Rabbi Alevsky now shares a memory from the *levaya* of the Rebbetzin: “Right before the *kever* was covered, the Rebbe

began to ask where the *‘kliyona’* (Russian word for a plastic) is. I believe there were a few drops of blood on it, which meant that it would need to be buried as well. They couldn’t find it, and the Rebbe asked people to move back to see whether it fell somewhere, but there was a lot of pressure from the crowd, which made things very difficult.

“The Rebbe was standing at the foot of the *kever*, I was standing at the head, facing the Rebbe, and Reb Leibel Mochkin was standing on the Rebbe’s left side. I don’t recall the details but at a certain point we realized that the Rebbe wanted us to go into the *kever* and look for it. We jumped inside and ultimately found the plastic...”

May the merit of the Rebbetzin stand for all of us to be blessed with a *shana tova umesukah*, and may we be speedily reunited with the coming of Moshiach.

1. An interview with Rabbi Leibel Alevsky about his years in 770 has been published in *Derher*, Iyar 5778.

2. See full overview of this story in “The Great Escape,” *Derher* Adar II 5782.