

IN THE FOOTSTEPS  
OF CHASSIDIM

# Three Degrees Removed

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לזכות  
החיילת בצבאות ה'  
שיינא שתחיל'  
לרגל יום הולדתה ג' טבת

נדפס ע"י הוריה  
הרה"ת ר' חיים אפרים וזוגתו  
מרת ח' מושקא שיחיו  
גאלדשטיין

## Streams of Stories

This Chof-Daled Teves, we will mark the Alter Rebbe's 213th *yom hilula* (5573-5786). *Farbrengens* will be held to mark the day, and stories of the *baal hahilula* will be shared.

This raises an interesting historical question.

How many times was that specific story repeated before reaching us? How many “links in the chain” separate us from the original moment it occurred?

In earlier generations, until the Frierdiker Rebbe encouraged Chassidim to transcribe their memoirs, a *written*

chassidische *maiseh* was an anomaly. With some exceptions, stories were generally conveyed orally—told and re-retold—until they reached us, or until they were finally committed to writing.

Over time, groups of stories came to form distinct “streams”—narrative traditions that could be traced back to a particular transmitter. One central stream, for example, centers on the stories of Reb Gronem, the famed *mashpia* in Lubavitch. He had heard countless stories from his own *mashpia*, Reb Avraham Zhembiner, who had in turn received them from his teachers. These were later transcribed by his students, such as Reb Chaim Mordechai Perlov in Likkutei Sipurim, Reb Folleh Kahan in Shmuos v'Sippurim, and Reb Yudel Chitrik in Reshimos Devarim.

Another important stream is stories preserved by Chassidim who emigrated to Eretz Yisroel from the time of the Alter Rebbe, especially those transmitted within the Slonim family, descendants of Rebbetzin Menucha Rochel.

The common denominator of most of these streams is the long oral journey—story after story, link after link—spanning decades and generations until they reached us.

But there is one line of transmission that stands unique. It is a kabbalah that surfaced only in more recent generations, yet still retains remarkable closeness to the distant past: the stories recorded in *Lisheima Oizen*, by Reb Zalman Duchman.



REB ZALMAN DUCHMAN.



Here is one:

My grandfather would relate that as a child, he stood near Reb Eizel [Homel'er]'s sukka and watched as they covered it with a thick layer of *s'chach*. My grandfather asked Reb Eizel: "Don't you need to see the stars?"

Reb Eizel answered: "Listen, Yoel'ke, I was by the [Alter] Rebbe in Liozna when they were covering the sukka. The Rebbe stood there and motioned with his holy hand, "*Noch gedichter*, thicker, thicker."

Reb Eizel finished with a cry: "*Andersh ken ich nit ton!* I cannot do otherwise!"<sup>1</sup>

This story, recorded in the not-too-distant past, is written by an author only three degrees removed from the Alter Rebbe. He heard the story from his grandfather, Reb Mordechai Yoel Duchman, who had heard it from his *mashpia*, Reb Eizik Homel'er, who himself was a chossid of the Alter Rebbe.

## Third Degree

Reb Zalman Duchman was one of the *eltere chassidim* in 770 throughout the early years of the Rebbe's *nesius* until his passing in 5730, and was the subject of a comprehensive profile in *A Chassidisher Derher* of Kislev 5783, titled, "A Link in the Golden Chain."

He was born in the city of Gomel (also known as Homel), an important city for Chabad Chassidim. As he describes it:

The Frierdiker Rebbe writes in a *sicha* that my hometown, Homel, was one of the first chassidishe cities.

Even in my times, until the Bolshevik era, the Lubavitcher shul had a *cheder sheni* (a *chabad'nitze*) where the *minyán* davened for almost two hours, as the Alter Rebbe instructs in *Iggeres Hakodesh*.<sup>2</sup>

Reb Zalman learned in Tomchei Temimim by the Rebbe Rashab, but a formative influence in his life was his grandfather, Reb Mordechai Yoel Duchman of Homel. His grandfather gave him a real *chassidisher chinuch*—and a voluminous amount of stories.

## Second Degree

The stories weren't easily earned. Reb Mordechai Yoel would say Chassidus every Shabbos and Yoma D'Pagra, but stories didn't come as easily. As Reb Zalman related:

The storytelling happened when I was able to discern the 'good moments' with my grandfather. [This wasn't common,] because my grandfather would say, "In *kelipa*, it's all laughter and fun, but in *kedusha* what I've seen is *kepeida* (or, in the words of the Frierdiker Rebbe, 'seriousness')."<sup>3</sup>

Reb Mordechai Yoel was from an exalted generation of



REB ZALMAN AS A YOUNG MAN IN RUSSIA.

Chassidim. As a young man, he had the merit to study in the Yeshiva of the Tzemach Tzedek in Lubavitch and received many *kiruvim* from the Rebbe. He arrived in Lubavitch at the unusually young age of fourteen, which makes his uniqueness quite evident.

Reb Zalman describes his grandfather's childhood as follows:

From early childhood, he was a *masmid* in learning and very frum; he would tie a headcovering to his head at night so it wouldn't fall off. He would spend full nights learning in the Homel'er shul; in his old age, he would give us *musar* and say that when he was 14 years old, he knew the entire Shas, Gemara with Rashi... His retention was so good that he didn't need to hear *chazara* after the *maamar* [of the Tzemach Tzedek].<sup>4</sup>

Aside from being one of the *yoshevim* near the Tzemach Tzedek, Reb Mordechai Yoel had the opportunity to learn in the presence of one of the legendary Chassidim of the older generation, Reb Eizik Homel'er, who served as the *rav* of the city.

Reb Eizel was already advanced in years; he passed away when Reb Mordechai Yoel was only about twenty years old. From a very young age, Reb Mordechai Yoel tried to use every opportunity to speak with Reb Eizik:

Reb Eizel didn't sit in *Dinei Torah*, because those

involved conflict, but he would answer *shailos*. Everyone knew that after *shemoneh esreh*, it was possible to approach him and ask questions.

My zeide Reb Mordechai Yoel told me that as a child, he would invent questions to have an excuse to talk to Reb Eizel. He would also ask the women who were his neighbors to send their questions with him.<sup>5</sup>

## YUD TES KISLEV ON SITE

During his days learning in the Yeshiva of the Tzemach Tzedek, Reb Mordechai Yoel had the opportunity to spend Yud-Tes Kislev in Liozna, in the presence of individuals who had experienced the events firsthand. Here is the story, as told by his grandson:

When the zeide Reb Mordechai Yoel was one of the *yoshevim* by the Tzemach Tzedek, ‘Nikolai was looking for them’ (in other words, they were being called to the draft). The Tzemach Tzedek sent them away from Lubavitch, some to Kalisk and some to Liozna. My zeide was sent to Liozna, and it turned out that he was there for Yud-Tes Kislev.

This was the *seider* in Liozna:

They brought large bottles with *mashke* and sacks of liver. There was an elder named Reb Yossele, who had been present when they had arrested the Alter Rebbe. He sat at the head of the table and repeated the story from beginning to end. When he described how they had slapped the Rebbetzin and she lost two teeth, he broke into tears.

Reb Yosef also related that the next Yud-Tes Kislev, i.e., the first celebration in Liozna, a large crowd arrived. It was a very warm Yud-Tes Kislev. They covered the courtyard with tarp and the Alter Rebbe himself went around and asked to eat, drink, and be *freilech*, “because my Yom Tov is higher...” It was about both *ruchnius* and *gashmius*—and the Aibershter helped; therefore, he requested that they should be *freilech*.<sup>13</sup>

## First Degree

Reb Eizik had been one of the early Chassidim of the Alter Rebbe.

Even before meeting the Alter Rebbe, he had been famous as a *lamdan* throughout the area, and the Alter Rebbe had specifically sent a *shadar* to Homel to engage with him and bring him for a visit to Liozna. Reb Eizel came, and his life was changed forever.

In Liozna, as Reb Mordechai Yoel told his grandson, there was no place for arrogance—even in one’s accomplishments in Torah learning.

Reb Eizel would relate that when he arrived in Liozna, he had already learned Shas seven times with all the *nosei kelim*. He was nicknamed *Der Zibele* (the seventh)—and he felt shamed like a thief.<sup>6</sup>

Reb Eizik was immediately taken by the personality of the Alter Rebbe, and became a lifelong chossid. Even many years later, when speaking of his Rebbe, he would be overcome with emotion:

When my zeide [Reb Mordechai Yoel] would start to describe Reb Eizel’s fervor when speaking of the Alter Rebbe, it was *moiredik*. “He’s on a higher level than all others—even Adam Harishon before the *cheit*.”

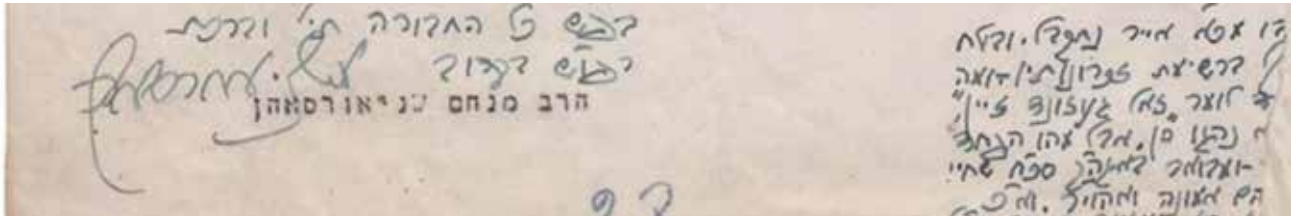
Reb Eizel would say, “If Moshe Rabbeinu and the Rebbe would arrive, and the Rebbe would give one directive and Moshe Rabbeinu would say otherwise, I would say: You do what you want; I can’t do different than my Rebbe—*ich ken andersh fun mein Rebbe’n nit tohn!*”<sup>7</sup>

At one farbrengen, Reb Eizel described the level of devotion the Chassidim felt toward the Alter Rebbe:

If the Rebbe would tell us to walk through fire, we would do it. Do you think we would go with the intention of being saved? No! With the intention of being burned!<sup>8</sup>



‘CHONA ARIEL’  
AUTHORED BY REB  
EIZIK HOMEL’ER.



THE REBBE'S RESPONSE TO REB ZALMAN, REGARDING WHAT HE WROTE ABOUT THE REBBE 'ZOL GEZUNT ZEIN'.

As a close student of Reb Eizik, Reb Mordechai Yoel received incredible stories and traditions from his teacher, passing them down to his grandson with the same vivid descriptions he had heard. In Reb Zalman's stories, the characters jump off the page in an incredible way.

Here's another story Reb Zalman's grandfather heard from Reb Eizik:

Once, the Alter Rebbe came out and gave out *mashke*. The 'feter Leibele' [the Alter Rebbe's brother Reb Yehuda Leib of Yanovitch] asked, "What's the occasion of the *simcha*?"

The Alter Rebbe responded: "I have today fulfilled what I wrote in my Tanya, 'Vehevei shfal ruach ... *afilu bifnei kal shebikalim*, be lowly ... even before the most irreverent person,' where I added the word *mamash*."<sup>9</sup>

"Today, I was visited by someone who has transgressed the entire Torah. I thought to myself, 'Nu...' I contemplated the matter for three minutes, and discovered that in seven matters, I am worse than him."

When Reb Eizel would repeat this story, he would bang on the table and say, "Such a thing—only the Rebbe could have done. *Dos hot mer az der Rebbe nit gekent*."<sup>10</sup>

Reb Eizik would sometimes express his disappointment with the *yeridas hadoros* he saw in the youth of his day. In his times, he would tell them, the *yungeleit* would learn all night, and then go out into the cold—without fur coats—and break the ice to go to *mikvah*. "This cannot be demanded from today's *yungeleit*," he would say, "but even today, you can daven and learn."<sup>11</sup>

In his old age, Reb Eizik would bemoan his own lowly state of *avoda*. He once remarked that he had nothing to bring along to the World of Truth except for one thing—*shimush talmidei chachamim*:

One summer, he related, he was walking down the street in Liozna as the Alter Rebbe was sitting at his window. A wind came and blew away a page of *Kesovim*; he picked it up and brought it back to the Alter Rebbe.

[As Reb Eizik told the story,] one of the listeners smiled, and Reb Eizel said, "Why are you laughing? This is real *shimush chachamim* according to halacha!"<sup>12</sup>

## Very Gezunt!

In honor of Chof-Daled Teves, the Alter Rebbe's *yom hilula*, we conclude with the following story:

Reb Zalman began writing his memories at the Rebbe's request shortly after he left Russia. These stories were written as letters to the Rebbe, who would comment on them and always encourage him to write more. The Rebbe would also occasionally share their contents with the Frierdiker Rebbe—who always expressed his enjoyment.

When the Frierdiker Rebbe was *nistalek*, Reb Zalman included the following story in his next letter:

When my zeide Reb Mordechai Yoel would speak about his Rebbe, the Tzemach Tzedek, even fifty years after the *histalkus*, he would say, "Der Rebbe zol gezunt zein," and then he would catch himself and add, "in Gan Eden."

In his response, the Rebbe wrote:

And regarding your fear of saying "zol gezunt zein"—that it was not customary—but what is the fear? The Alter Rebbe explains in Iggeres Hakodesh Siman 28 that the life of a tzaddik is his Emuna, Ahava and Yir'a.

If so, he is very *gezunt* indeed.<sup>14</sup> ❶

1. The Alter Rebbe, story #4.
2. Reb Mordechai Yoel Duchman, story #1.
3. Reb Mordechai Yoel Duchman, story #22.
4. The Tzemach Tzedek, stories #1–2.
5. Reb Eizik Homel'er, story #22.
6. Reb Eizik Homel'er, story #36.
7. The Alter Rebbe, story #3. The Rebbe commented on this story that it is similar to the story about Rabbeinu Tam and Moshe Rabbeinu, recorded in Seder Hadoros 1:4930.
8. The Alter Rebbe, story #5.
9. Perek 30.
10. The Alter Rebbe, story #16.
11. Reb Eizik Homel'er, story #50.
12. The Alter Rebbe, story #37.
13. This seems to mean that the imprisonment was both a physical threat and also a threat to *ruchniusdiker* matters.
14. Erev Rosh Chodesh Sivan 5710. Lisheima Ozen (new edition) p. 34.