

A Taste of Reality

The Rebbe's Farbrengens, Then and Now

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“This is where the Rebbe addressed current events, in the Jewish world and beyond, and where he introduced all the major *mitzvot* and initiatives throughout the years. It is where he addressed the President of the United States as well as a lonely *Yid* in Russia....

“The Rebbe lives on a higher plane—Yiddishkeit is a *reality*, Hashem is a *reality*, Moshiach is a *reality*—and when you experience the farbrengens you are uplifted to that reality...”



מוקדש לחיזוק ההתקשרות
לכ"ק אדמו"ר זי"ע

נדפס ע"י
הרוצה בעילום שמו



The story of the Rebbe's farbrengens cannot be told in a single article, nor in a shelf of books. Farbrengens were the setting at which the Rebbe taught us everything we know, where he addressed the world, and revitalized world Jewry. The transcripts of these farbrengens fill hundreds of *sefarim*, and the audio recordings fill thousands of hours.

A farbrengen is something that truly cannot be captured in words, only experienced. Today, as before Gimmel Tammuz, generations of Chassidim continue to find nourishment and energy from listening to and watching the Rebbe's farbrengens, as they are educated by the Rebbe just as Chassidim before them were.

We present the following collection of tidbits, anecdotes, and reflections about the Rebbe's farbrengens, in the hope that this will provide something of a taste for our readership. May we be *zoche* to a new farbrengen with the Rebbe himself, now!

The First Farbrengens – תש"ז

The Rebbe first began holding farbrengens during the *nesius* of the Frierdiker Rebbe, many years before he accepted the *nesius*. The first was held during Tishrei of 5960 (תש"ז), when the Frierdiker Rebbe traveled abroad to the United States, temporarily parting from the Chassidim in Riga.

Although he was of Chassidic royalty, the Rebbe had a quiet, muted demeanor and few knew him personally. When he began conducting farbrengens, people were astonished by his breadth of knowledge and infectious vitality and energy.

In a letter to the Frierdiker Rebbe, Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Althois, a senior Chossid, described the scene. "He spoke words of Chassidus for several hours without pause, and they were mixed and spiced with *midrashim* of our sages and Kabbalah... Sweet were his words on the ears of the listeners, and all those gathered were amazed."

Rabbi Althois added that present at one of the farbrengens was a Mr. Vekslir—"a very quiet man, very critical, and a great thinker (by his own estimation)"—who came to see for himself what everyone was talking about. He stayed with the Chassidim until two o'clock in the morning, and left greatly excited. "In my entire life, I've never seen or heard anything like this!" he exclaimed to Rabbi Althois. "Happy is she who bore him!"



THE REBBE FARBRENGS WITH CHASSIDIM IN PARIS DURING HIS 5707 VISIT.

Shabbos Mevorchim Farbrengens

Shortly after the Rebbe arrived in America in 5701, he was approached by several members of the shul in 770 to begin leading the farbrengen on Shabbos Mevorchim—until then they had sufficed with enjoying a *kiddush*-buffet and singing *niggunim*—but he refused.

The *gabbai* of the shul, Reb Meir Roth, wasn't ready to give up so easily. At some point during that period, he went to visit the Frierdiker Rebbe at a health resort in Morristown, New Jersey, and requested that he ask the Rebbe to agree to farbreng. "I will give you three dollars to buy *mashkeh* for the *kiddush*", the Frierdiker Rebbe replied, "and my son-in-law will not be able to refuse."

Indeed, from that point and on, the Rebbe began farbrenging on every single Shabbos Mevorchim, a practice that withstood decades of fundamental change. Throughout the next fifty years, the Rebbe never missed a Shabbos Mevorchim Farbrengen (!), a stunning display of his unconditional dedication to the Frierdiker Rebbe.



VOV TISHREI 5744, LEVI FREIDIN VIA JEW 194932



CIRCA PURIM 5725

Farbrengen Schedule

Major Farbrengens: There were the official farbrengens on major milestones, which were broadcast throughout the world by hook-up (starting in 5730), and later shown on television (starting in 5740). They attracted very large crowds, far beyond Lubavitch, and this was where the Rebbe would speak about topics applicable to a wider crowd and address current events. The major farbrengens were:

- Vov Tishrei (from 5726 and on, the year after the *histalkus* of the Rebbe's mother, Rebbetzin Chana)
- Yud-Tes Kislev
- Yud Shevat
- Purim (this farbrengen was not broadcast on television)
- Yud-Alef Nissan (between the years 5731-5745)
- Yud-Beis Tammuz
- Chof Av

Yomim Tovim: The Rebbe farbrenged for many hours during each of the *yomim tovim*, though there were variations depending on the *yom tov*:

- Second day of Rosh Hashanah
- Second day of Sukkos (until 5730)
- Chol Hamoed Sukkos, a farbrengen geared to *talmidei hayeshiva* (until 5724)
- Simchas Torah evening, before *hakafos*
- Simchas Torah day
- Second night of Pesach, after the Seder (until 5730)
- Second day of Shavuos

In the earlier years, the schedule of farbrengens was fairly set, and there were few exceptions. The Rebbe hardly farbrenged on Shabbos unless it was Shabbos Mevorchim or a special *yoma d'pagra*. But as the years went on, the Rebbe began farbrenging more frequently, and for longer durations. Now there were often farbrengens on "minor" occasions, like Chof Cheshvan (the birthday of the Rebbe Rashab), Yud Kislev (the *chag hageulah* of the Mitteler Rebbe), Chof-Daled Teves (the *histalkus* of the Alter Rebbe), 15 Shevat, Lag Bomer, and so on.

“I never saw the Rebbe’s eyes as I did then...”

Dr. Yitzchak Block was a young *bochur* just becoming close to Lubavitch when he experienced his first farbrengen. He related:¹

My first farbrengen was Yud-Beis Tammuz 5712, and it took place in the small *zal* upstairs. There were approximately 80 *bochurim*, and another 50-60 *baalei batim*.

People were standing on the stacked benches, with their heads almost touching the ceiling, and the whole place was steaming... The windows were open but it didn’t help very much. It was so hot; you could literally see the sweat dripping from the ceiling.

The Rebbe spoke in Yiddish, and I hardly knew Yiddish at all, so I didn’t understand a word of what was going on. But there were two things that had a tremendous impact on me. One was the singing of the *niggunim*; then there was the Rebbe’s eyes. I never saw eyes like that. Even when I was in *yechidus*, it wasn’t the same thing. I never saw the Rebbe’s eyes as I did then... I cannot describe it or give an explanation for it, but it had a very great, moving effect upon me.

The Rebbe noticed me, and sort of shook his head toward me. Then, right in the middle of the farbrengen, the Rebbe picked up a piece of cake, looked at me and said in English, “Have you had cake yet?” Everybody looked at me. I’m a very polite southern boy, and I said “Thank you very much, I had cake already.”

The whole room goes “Huh...?” I didn’t know that I had said anything wrong. I thought I had said something very polite. (I actually

hadn’t, but I felt embarrassed that the Rebbe was making a whole thing out of me...) The Rebbe smiled, and put the cake back on the plate.

At the end of the farbrengen, the Rebbe called over Rabbi Zalman Posner [the shliach who had initially met Dr. Block in Tennessee and brought him to New York. –Ed.] and gave him two pieces of cake. After the farbrengen was over, Rabbi Posner comes over to me and says, “Yitzchak, the Rebbe wants you to have this piece of cake. I suggest that you make a *bracha* and eat it.” I ate it, and that was it. I forgot about the entire episode.

Fast forward about thirty years. By that time I was already in London, Ontario and had nine children. I was already an *eltere chossid*, from *ziknei anash kayn ayin hara*... On a certain occasion, Rabbi Posner came over to me and says, “Yitzchak, I want to tell you something now that the Rebbe told me thirty years ago, but I never told it to you before. Do you remember your first farbrengen, when the Rebbe gave me a piece of cake for you?” I said, “Sure, I’ll never forget that.”

He said, “Well, the Rebbe told me to tell you something which I never told you: ‘*Zolt ir em zoggen sof sof vet er verren ah chossid, er darf nit farshpuren di tzeit.*’—You should tell him that, sooner or later, he is going to become a Chossid. There’s no reason to waste time.”

He was afraid to tell me at the time, so I never knew...

CIRCA 5716





Early in the Morning

In the early 5720s, being that the Shabbos farbrengens were held relatively infrequently, people didn't have specific places where they would stand, and because the room was so small, having a good place to hear the Rebbe was essential.

"Every *bochur* had a set bench upon which he would stand," Rabbi Leibel Shapiro says, "but as far as who would get the closer spot on the bench itself—that depended on when you arrived in 770 in the morning. Whoever arrived in 770 first would get the closer place. You didn't have to stand the entire time in your place, but by coming to 770 you 'took' your spot. The next person who came to 770 was behind you, and so on. Eventually, this evolved into every person having a '*makom kavua*,' a set place. But originally we used to come to 770 very early in the morning, 5:00 or 6:00 a.m., to get a good spot."



VOV TISHREI 5744, LEVI FREIDIN VIA JEM 194932



Lessons in Time

The first two or three *sichos* of the farbrengen usually focused on the message of the time, on the lesson of the *parsha*, day, the month, or the *yom tov*. At almost every single farbrengen, the Rebbe quotes—with newfound energy, as if he was saying it for the first time—the Torah of the Baal Shem Tov that every occurrence in the world is *b'hashgacha pratis*, and one must certainly learn from the *parsha* and the calendar. The *parsha* isn't just a base from which one can find a nice *drasha*; *Toras Emes* and *Toras Chayim* [the True Torah and the Living Torah] has a message that it is teaching us *now*.

In traditional Jewish thinking, the cycle of the *parshiyos* and the months is largely a side note to the regular constants of living a Jewish life. One Shabbos is basically the same as another. By the Rebbe, days don't simply pass by—they *happen*. He elevates the seemingly passive passage of time, the seemingly insignificant schedulings of the year, to the realm of *events*. Every Shabbos and every Yom Tov—whether it's Parshas Shelach or Parshas Korach—is an entirely different experience.



The Highlight of the week

“The farbrengen was the highlight of our week,” says Rabbi Zushe Greenberg, shliach in Solon, Ohio. “Even people who didn’t understand Yiddish and couldn’t necessarily follow the farbrengens were excited when a farbrengen was announced, and they looked forward to being there. If there was a surprise farbrengen, the joy went through the roof. The farbrengen would transport you into a different world—it was where the Rebbe was sharing himself with the Chassidim, where he was educating us. The rest of the week—at a davening or by a *haftarah*—we would see how the Rebbe conducted himself. During *yechidus*, the Rebbe would be speaking to people on *their* level. But the farbrengen is where the Rebbe expressed what *he* was coming to say, where the Rebbe was truly revealed.

“The Rebbe would speak every word with such fiery energy, it is an experience that I cannot put into words. Even people who didn’t really understand what was going on—somehow they, too, were transported to a higher place at the farbrengens. It was electrifying.”

Dr. Velvel Greene was becoming closer to Yiddishkeit when he experienced a farbrengen for the first time. He later related: “The Rebbe spoke in Yiddish, so I understood the words, but I didn’t have enough Jewish knowledge to comprehend most of it. The whole event amazed me: There was the Rebbe—educated in math and science himself—who spoke of the ‘soul’ as something real, not just an idea. And listening to his every word were a thousand Chassidim, working guys, just like me. But for them, everything the Rebbe said had critical importance for their lives today. A famous Jewish poet wrote about standing on the threshold of existence, looking into the depth of the Jewish soul. That’s what I did at that farbrengen. It was my epiphany.”



CHOF AV 5734, V SCHILDKRAUT VIA JEM 108665

The Rebbe's Hand Motions

Watching the farbrengen from the front, you only see the Rebbe's movements as he was speaking; his hands were kept under the table. But those few people whose place was on the *bima* behind the Rebbe saw that he was moving his hands vigorously, hidden under the tablecloth. Some *sichos* would get more and more fiery, and one could often see the tablecloth jumping up, as the Rebbe's hand movements become increasingly animated and pronounced. On very rare occasions, the Rebbe spoke with his hands over the tablecloth, and one could see how the Rebbe moved his hands the entire time.

"As children, we would sit under the Rebbe's table during farbrengens," says Rabbi Shmuly Metzger, shliach in Manhattan. "We could see the Rebbe's hands moving strongly as he said the *Rashi sichos*—*fregt Rashi, entfert Rashi* (Rashi asks, Rashi answers)—there was a lot going on behind the scenes."

A New Revelation

The range of topics at the farbrengens are as broad as the scope of the Rebbe's *nesius*.

First and foremost, the farbrengens are the venue where the Rebbe taught Torah to the world, beginning with Torah's message for *now*, and continuing with a vast range of subjects in *nigleh* and Chassidus. This is also where the Rebbe addressed current events, in the Jewish world and beyond, and where he introduced all the major *mitzvot* and initiatives throughout the years. It is where he addressed the President of the United States as well as a lonely *Yid* in Russia. Although we use the term "farbrengen," the Rebbe's farbrengens really cannot be described using any single term.

"The Rebbe's *hashpa'a* came through the farbrengens," Rabbi Shlomo Zarchi says, "both the *hashpa'a* to the Chassidim as well as to the world. When the Rebbe 'arranged' things in the heavens to save the Jews of Russia by taking down Stalin—that was at a farbrengen. When there was a new *mitzva* to announce to the world, the Rebbe often called surprise farbrengens where he gave the details and made a *shturem* about it. When there was a major global issue, the Rebbe's response came at a farbrengen, whether it was on a practical or on a spiritual level.

"This was true on a more personal level as well. The Rebbe would come to the farbrengen no matter what—with a fever, colds, and so on—and he expected the same of the Chassidim. When Rabbi Chaim Gutnick

came to to the Rebbe for the first time, the Rebbe asked him why he had missed a farbrengen. He replied that he had been sick. When a person is sick, the Rebbe told him, *darf men ersht zein baim farbrengen*, that's when you should certainly be at the farbrengen! Farbrengens are the source of the Rebbe's *brachos*!

"In the earlier years, it was not uncommon for the Rebbe to finish answering someone's questions from *yechidus* at the farbrengen. Later on, after private *yechidus* was discontinued, the Rebbe said that farbrengens are the *yechidus* of today—for those who want it."

On a practical level, the announcement that the Rebbe would be coming down to farbreng brought about tremendous excitement to Chassidim.

"Growing up as a child in Crown Heights," Rabbi Metzger says, "even before I was able to understand anything, we all knew if there was going to be a farbrengen. As kids, we had a tremendous love for the Rebbe. It wasn't religious in nature, it was just this great love and admiration, and there was an urgency in the air before farbrengens, people were running in the streets..."

"Farbrengens with the Rebbe are of my fondest memories," adds Rabbi Yosef Wolvovsky, shliach in Glastonbury, Connecticut. "Walking from our home to 770 with my father for the Rebbe's farbrengens was always exciting; I can still feel the bounce in my step..."



4 SIVAN 5747, LEVI FREIDIN VIA JEW 5696

Location

For the first few years of the Rebbe's *nesius*, the small upstairs shul in 770 (barely) sufficed for the farbrengen.

"When the farbrengens were held in the small *zal* upstairs," Rabbi Shlomo Zarchi relates, "the setup was similar to how it was later on, but on a much smaller scale: The Rebbe's table was set upon a small *bima* on the right (south) side of the shul, where the window to the *cheder sheini* is today.

"In those years, if a boy under the age of bar mitzvah had a birthday during the week—you have to remember there weren't so many children of *anash* hanging around then—the child would go over to the Rebbe to say *l'chaim*. Because the room was very small and the middle part of the room was full with people sitting, the only way to get to the Rebbe was by coming through the door behind the Rebbe's table which led from the *cheder sheini*. I remember having this opportunity to go over and receive a *bracha* for my *yom holedes* as a small child."

As Lubavitch grew and the Rebbe's farbrengens became increasingly famous in circles far beyond the Chassidic world, it became impossible to fit everyone into the room. From 5714, the major farbrengens that were during the winter were held in various halls in the Crown Heights area, while in the summer they took place in the courtyard adjacent to the building, known as the *shalash*. Shabbos farbrengens during the summer took place in the *shalash* as well. (It was too cold to farbreng there during the winter.)

There were a number of halls in and around Crown Heights that were used for the large winter farbrengens: The Franklin Manor, the Baltimore Hall, the Gayheart Hall, and the Albany Manor. Before every farbrengen, there would be a notice published in the Jewish newspapers announcing where it will be held. The Rebbe was driven to the farbrengen in a private car or taxi, and the Chassidim would come with busses from 770. Many special farbrengens throughout the years took place in these halls, including the famous farbrengen of Purim 5718. In fact, Chassidim recall that it was sometimes difficult to book the same hall twice in a row, because the management wasn't accustomed to this type of singing and dancing...

The following years saw a series of expansions in 770: In 5720, the *shalash* was built into a permanent room, with all farbrengens relocated there. In 5727 and 5733, the two buildings next door, 784 and 788 Eastern Parkway, were purchased. By removing the first floors of these buildings and tearing down the walls between them and the former *shalash*, the downstairs shul of 770 was created. Usually, it was set up as a shul, with benches, tables, and a *bima*. When it came time for a farbrengen, it was transformed into a mini-arena. [Read more about the expansion of 770 in Derher Nissan and Iyar 5775].

28 ELUL 5735; LEVI FREIDIN VIA JEM 140870



Signs of a Shabbos farbrengen

There were many Shabbosim when no one knew until Shabbos itself whether there would be a farbrengen. There were several signs from the Rebbe that one would be held:

- Beginning in 5725 (until 5748), the Rebbe would discuss a Rashi at every Shabbos farbrengen. [See *Revolution in Rashi A Chassidisher Derher*, Vov Tishrei and Shevat 5775.] During certain years, before every farbrengen the Rebbe would notify which Rashi he would be discussing. If the Rebbe did so, it meant that there would be a farbrengen.
- If the Rebbe would encourage the singing during Ha'aderes V'haemuna, that meant there would be a farbrengen. (In the earlier years, if the Rebbe would encourage the singing during Hu Eloikeinu, that was also a sign; but later Hu Eloikeinu was sung every Shabbos so it was no longer an indication.)
- If after davening, the Rebbe would walk out of shul before the *gabbai's* announcements, that also meant that there would be a farbrengen.

There were several occasions throughout the years that a farbrengen was announced after *musaf*, completely unexpectedly, and many of the Chassidim were out of town (for example at Yarchei Kalla in Gan Yisroel). These surprise Shabbos farbrengens was held with very few people in attendance, giving it a very warm, *heimishe* atmosphere. The Rebbe related at one such farbrengen that the Chassidim had asked if they should leave Crown Heights for Shabbos—but they hadn't asked if there would be a farbrengen...

My Questions on Rashi

Rabbi Yosef Wolvovsky relates: “A special memory that I have is when the Rebbe chose to address a question in Rashi that I asked! (This actually happened three times). The way it worked was that each week numerous *kuntreisim* of *chidushei Torah* and *ha'aros* were printed. These booklets would usually include a section on “*pshuto shel mikra*” which was mostly questions and comments on Rashi, based on the way the Rebbe taught Rashi.

“The Rebbe would often choose to address a question printed in one of these *kuntreisim*. Our teacher in eighth grade, Rabbi Feitel Levin, encouraged us to publish our own *kuntres*. You can imagine the ‘deep’ questions our group of twelve-year-old boys came up with... And you can imagine our surprise when the Rebbe chose to discuss our questions! (One of these times I am actually not that proud of: The Rebbe admonished us—me!—for not looking to see if the question was already addressed on a previous occasion...)”



TI SIVAN 5747, LEVI FREDIN VIA JEM 6606



YUD-TES KISLEV 5747, YOSSEI MELAMED VIA JEM 119419

Moshiach as Reality

Perhaps the biggest constant in the farbrengens throughout the years was the Rebbe’s relentless focus on Moshiach, which steadily grew in intensity as the years progressed. The Rebbe introduced the practice of completing almost every single *sicha* and *maamar* with a wish for Moshiach, starting from the very first *maamar* of Bassi Legani. Many farbrengens finished with the song *Sheyibaneh Beis Hamikdash*. The farbrengens are where the Rebbe taught us his approach to all matters regarding Moshiach—there are countless *sichos* and *maamarim* expounding upon the chapters in Rambam discussing Moshiach and the *Beis Hamikdash* and lays out the fundamentals for how to approach these subjects that had been under-examined for so many centuries.

Perhaps most significantly, in the farbrengens the Rebbe drives home the fact that Moshiach is a *reality*. As the Rebbe himself commented, many people couldn’t understand how the Rebbe can speak about Moshiach with such urgency and immediateness—“These are wild words!” they would say—but the Rebbe shakes us from our *galus* stupor and uplifts us to the realization that Moshiach truly is “just behind the wall.”

“Go Into the Farbrengen”

Rabbi Shmuly Metzger relates: One Shabbos afternoon, when I was a young child, we were playing in the yard near the library during the farbrengen. The Rebbetzin came to the window and said, in English, “You kids should go into the farbrengen.”



6 TISHREI 5731, Y MINKOWITZ

Absorbing the Farbrengen

“The scene in the room after the Rebbe would leave the farbrengen made a great impression on me as a child,” Rabbi Shmuly Metzger says. “Everyone was passionately discussing the *sichos*, and I have this vague memory of Rabbi Yaakov Yehuda Hecht standing on a car rallying everybody about something the Rebbe had said. We lived near 770, so after the farbrengen the *bochurim* would come to my house for *seudas Shabbos*, *chazzer* the farbrengen and argue about it. No one was sitting around Shabbos afternoon. It was a different world.

“We once asked our *mashpia* Rabbi Berel Lipsker, who the Rebbe was referring to in a certain *sicha*. He told us, ‘When you’re listening to a farbrengen, you have to know that the Rebbe is talking to you. If the Rebbe’s talking about someone doing something incorrectly—you’re the one he’s referring to!’”



Farbrengens *Then and Now*

A Roundtable Discussion

We are fortunate to have hundreds of thousands of pages of the Rebbe's Torah. These include Likkutei Sichos, Igros Kodesh, Reshimos and many more. What is unique about listening to and watching the Rebbe's farbrengens?

Rabbi Zushe Greenberg: The Rebbe often quoted the Gemara where Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi says that his superior wisdom came from seeing Rabbi Meir from behind as he taught Torah, and that if he would have seen him from the front, he would have known and understood much more.² Hashem gave us the Torah face to face, פנים בפנים דיבר ה' עמכם, and that is how one truly learns Torah—by seeing and listening.

The Rebbe lives on a higher plane—Yiddishkeit is a *reality*, Hashem is a *reality*, Moshiach is a *reality*—and when you experience the farbrengens you are uplifted to that reality.

We saw this *emes* by the Rebbe himself. The Rebbe spoke about everything with such a *fire*, with such *energy*, like he never said it before! The Rebbe speaks about issues like the safety of Eretz Yisroel or *mihu Yehudi* over and over and over again, with such passion and with such concern—you get swept up in it! These were things that spanned decades, yet he spoke about them for years and years without getting tired, without ever giving up! This was a *real* thing by the Rebbe!

Rabbi Yitzchak Goldshmid (Valley Stream, NY): When you spend time listening to farbrengens, the Rebbe educates you how to *think*.

On a very simple level, when you learn *sichos* in Likkutei Sichos, you learn how to analyze something, how to take an idea apart. The more you learn the Rebbe's *sichos* and *maamarim*, the more you adapt to the Rebbe's way of thinking. This is true both on an intellectual level, and also in *emuna*—how to approach an idea of Torah like the Rebbe does; every word in Torah is precise, true, and infinite.

But when you *listen* to and *watch* the farbrengens, it brings this to a whole new level. You absorb the finer inflections of *how* the Rebbe discusses something: When the Rebbe smiles about something or when he particularly enjoys a certain *svara*; what the Rebbe accepts as logical and what is invalid.

Whether you realize it or not, the more we listen to the Rebbe, the more we absorb the Rebbe's approach. We don't even realize how much we,

as Lubavitchers, are affected by the Rebbe's style and education. As radical as it sounds to say that we, simple people, can be educated by the Rebbe himself—the fact is that it's true. And the more you listen and watch farbrengens, the more it affects you."

Rabbi Zalman Teitelbaum: When I was a child, I was *zoche* (thanks to some incredible friends) to constantly be near the Rebbe. This included being close *bgashmius*, at times close enough to reach out and kiss the Rebbe's tzitzis, and to be able to hear every word at the farbrengens—and I yearn every day for that again. However, I have never felt as close as now, listening to the farbrengens and following the *tochen*, the feeling, the inspiration, the atmosphere, each week.

The Rebbe is not only teaching Torah, or giving a *shiur*—he's farbrenging! It's one thing to learn a *sicha* inside a *sefer*, but it's an entirely different experience when you hear *how* the Rebbe is saying it—the concern he has in the question, the *geshmak* he has in the answer, *how* the Rebbe tells a story. You're being *taken* somewhere.

In addition, when you're listening, every line the Rebbe says has so much power. When you read something in a *sefer*, you're usually left with the general point of the *sicha*; each line individually has less of an impact. But when you hear every line with such *emphasis*, as the Rebbe says it—you can farbreng the whole week on a single *vort*!

Do you have any tips that you can share with our readers?

Rabbi Zushe Greenberg: As the Rebbe said countless times, paraphrasing the *possuk* "ראשיכם משבטיכם...מחוטב עציך ועד שואב מימך",



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the farbrengens are directed towards every level of people, the simplest of the simple as well as the greatest of the great. The Rebbe brings down the topics in such a way that anyone who knows basic Yiddish is capable of understanding them. At the same time, the *mehalech*, the build of the *sicha* and *how* everything fits together—that is something that takes time and practice. The Rebbe's every word is precious and counted, and a beginner may find it difficult, at least at first, to follow an entire *sicha* at a time.

It's important to keep in mind that even if you cannot (yet) understand or follow the entire flow of the *sicha*, or if you are in a situation where it is difficult to focus completely, that doesn't take away from the value of listening to and watching farbrengens. Beyond the spiritual effect of hearing the Rebbe's voice and watching

him, the Rebbe's *sichos* are said in such a way that you can absorb individual points regardless of your comprehension of the entire build-up.

Rabbi Yosef Wolvovsky: When I was a child, I did not understand that much, definitely not the flow of the *sichos*. Still, I was taken by the general environment and by the *niggunim*—especially when the Rebbe would encourage the singing (or even stand up)! I vividly remember holding up my little *l'chaim* cup and waiting for the Rebbe to turn in my direction and nod his blessings. What a jolt!

With time and concentration, I did begin to grasp more of the Rebbe's words. From an early age, I began to take notes during the weekday farbrengens. On Sundays, our class in Oholei Torah would dedicate a period to "*chazzara*." This review exercise definitely encouraged our listening memory and recording skills.



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In addition to the Rebbe's words, we would recap any special moments or "*tenu'os*" of the Rebbe. (We were all eager to participate when the Rebbe spoke a "sharp" *sicha* about a "controversial" matter...) Even when I was not at the actual farbrengen—listening by hookup at home or camp—I would try to take notes.

Today, I will sometimes listen to a farbrengen at home or at the Chabad House. Most often, however, I am listening in the car. In our *makom hashlichus* we do a lot of driving, so listening in the car works well. You know the feeling of arriving somewhere but needing to finish a phone call or something else you are listening to? Imagine if it's not "something else," but the Rebbe's voice. There are times when I simply can't bring myself to stop listening...

Like all important things, this takes effort. There are always other things to do or listen to. Personally, I try to listen to the Rebbe's voice in the morning – before other things come up and before I can make any phone calls. It takes discipline, but it is so very important – and well worth it. It also takes concentration, and I will often listen to the same *sicha* two or three times.

Rabbi Zushe Greenberg: Just as learning Gemara doesn't come naturally to anyone, listening to a farbrengen takes practice and work. You have to learn the style. I came to the Rebbe in the beginning of 5746, but it took me until about a year and a half later, that I felt like I truly "got" how to follow a *sicha*. It's not that I wasn't understanding the *sichos* beforehand: I was listening to the farbrengens and attending *chazzara*, and I remember many *sichos* from then. But it took me a full year and half until I truly understood how to follow and *chazzer* an entire *sicha*. I remember that I was reviewing the farbrengen together with a *bochur*

who was a bit older than me—and you know when something just *clicks*?—something clicked."

Personally, I wouldn't recommend for people to read over the *sicha* before they watch it, because then you are entering the farbrengen with expectations, with a preconceived notion of what is being discussed. It's not a *live* experience. You have to come to a *sicha* totally open.

Rabbi Zalman Teitelbaum: Here are some tips that worked for me to be able to listen and follow the Rebbe's farbrengens. For background, throughout all of the years I had never been able to walk away from a *sicha* remembering/knowing anything of what was said. This includes being at the actual farbrengens or listening to the hook-ups, and in recent years, listening to recordings and videos.

Every person is different, but these are tactics that helped me, and perhaps others will find them useful as well.

There are three basic things that come to mind: 1) focus, 2) grasping the flow, and 3) the time.

Two years ago, I learned the *maamar* Basi Legani 5716 before Yud Shevat. The *maamar* discussed the humility of a *talmid*, a student. There was one thing the Rebbe said that I didn't quite understand: when you're listening, you have to just listen, without even thinking about what's being said. I really didn't understand what that meant.

Later, the Derher published an article regarding the *chazzara* of the Rebbe's *sichos*.³ Rabbi Simon Jacobson said that while the Rebbe was talking, you couldn't think even for a second about what the Rebbe was saying—you just had to listen. If you thought, even for a second, how to explain the point or how to apply it, you would completely lose track of the *sicha*.

This was a very revealing point to me. Every time I would hear a point in a *sicha*, I would always think about



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what would be a good way to explain it or what a great explanation it is for some other point—and at that point I would immediately lose track of the rest of the *sicha*.

[As a side point, I never had this problem by any other speech or lecture. Typically in a speech you can predict what a person is going to say for the next couple minutes, or if you catch it in the middle you can figure out what was said before. By the Rebbe's *sichos*, it seems that every second is precisely chosen, and can't be replaced by listening better before or after.]

So tip number one is to listen, and really not think of anything else at all.

—There are a couple of things that help me keep focus. One is to translate out loud while I'm listening. This is very helpful when someone is actually there, for example when I'm giving someone a ride in the car, but I find it helpful even without anyone there.

—The other one is to take notes afterwards and share them with others. I find that this helps both in the responsibility to focus the whole way through, and also in the next tip of keeping with the flow of the questions and answers.

The second tip is to be mindful of the theme and the topic, and what it is that the Rebbe is "teaching" in a given *sicha*. This is not as intuitive as it sounds. For example, the Rebbe may begin a talk discussing how this is the third day of the week or month, and go into an explanation about the value of "three." At that point it's hard to see whether this is the introduction of a central theme of the *sicha*, or an anecdotal thought that will give way to an entirely different topic once the theme begins.

This possibility exists also in the middle of a *sicha*, where the Rebbe may explain a detail in the central theme with an entire explanation, or

story, etc. but in the broader context of the *sicha*, it is anecdotal. [We see from the way the Rebbe treats such points in the previous Rabbeim's *maamarim*, where he often deduces entire themes from the placement and order of such seemingly "anecdotal" points, and that they are definitely much more and deeper than this. However that would seem to be a point for much deeper study.]

So the important thing is to constantly keep mindful of the questions that are asked and the points being brought up, to mark them against the general flow of the *sicha*. (This could sometimes contradict what I wrote before, but since it's on the very points of the *sicha* itself, it usually doesn't). One tip that I seem to remember from the article in the *Derher* was to try to remember points on your finger, and as the Rebbe makes new points, to try to associate each one with another finger.

The last, but certainly an important tip, is time. We know the Rebbe said that time belongs to Hashem and that we can make time for what we need, but I personally find that I need to almost force myself into situations that work.

It really does take focus. I don't know if I've ever focused so much in my life like I've focused on the Rebbe's farbrengens in the last few years. But once you take everything else out of your mind and just focus—it's not hard at all; it's given to you on a silver platter.

Any concluding words?

Rabbi Zushe Greenberg: Today we have such a gift. We have the tapes and videos of the Rebbe's farbrengens. This is unprecedented in history: From Moshe Rabbeinu until the Friediker Rebbe, we don't have comprehensive recordings of a single one of the *nesi'im*. But the Rebbe wasn't only speaking to the people in 770 at the time—he was speaking to those who

would listen and learn the *sichos* until today and beyond.

Yechidus cannot be experienced as it was then; *tekios* cannot be experienced as before—but farbrengens are there for us to listen to and watch. The Rebbe's farbrengens give us the ability to be true Chassidim *today*. The Rebbe gave us forty years of recordings and videos, starting from the very first farbrengen of the *kabbolas hanesius*. A lifetime of a person cannot cover everything! I believe that everything else, like stories of the Rebbe and listening to the experiences of Chassidim—all that is secondary to being educated by the Rebbe himself.

True, unlike before Gimmel Tammuz, when you could experience the farbrengen just by being there, whether or not you understood anything, today you have to invest in understanding the *sichos*. But when you do so, the *sichos* uplift you and you have the ability to become a Chossid who is educated directly by the Rebbe.


Rabbi Zalman Teitelbaum: Listening to farbrengens has had a real effect on my daily life. On the most

practical level: When you're listening to farbrengens, you always have a hundred things to say to anyone who you're talking to—a *geshmake vort*, a story, a deep insight. You're brimming with Chassidus.

But it's much more than that. I must say that no matter how close it felt to see the Rebbe's smile and love when I was growing up in 770, it does not compare to this. There is a special closeness of being drawn in to the Rebbe, with the questions, the concerns, the excitement as the Rebbe weaves a full farbrengen in *tochen*, depth, practical challenges, emotion, and more. Honestly, since I started listening on a regular basis, I've felt a much deeper and more emotional *hiskashrus* to the Rebbe. It's a different ballgame.

Rabbi Yosef Wolvovsky: For me, listening to farbrengens—hearing the Rebbe's voice first hand, singing along with the *niggunim*, experiencing the atmosphere in 770—is a primary way of maintaining *hiskashrus*. How could it not affect you? You just experienced a farbrengen with the Rebbe!

Aside from the inner feelings that these farbrengens evoke, there is a real tangible impact that they leave. When I just heard something from the Rebbe, my own *geshmak* is increased exponentially. This *chayus* comes across to my wife and my children, as well as to our community members. (At times, I will write up a concept that I just heard and disseminate it. The Rebbe simply makes everything so real and relevant). It is truly alive!

May our focus on the Rebbe's farbrengens be the *keili* to finally bring about the big farbrengen with the Rebbe himself, now! 

1. Unpublished interview with Jem's "My Encounter" team.
2. Eruvin 13b
3. *Retaining Chassidus—Part II*, Derher 42 (119), Adar II, 5776.



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