

לזכות
הרה"ת ר' שלום דוב בער
וזוגתו מרת ח' מושקא
ובנותיהם ברכה ליפשא,
עליזה ושיינדל שיחיו
שוחאט

Changing Lives Forever

The story of "Pegisha"

The story of a weekend for college students. A weekend spent in Crown Heights basking in the Rebbe's presence. A weekend which brought thousands of young people closer to Yiddishkeit.

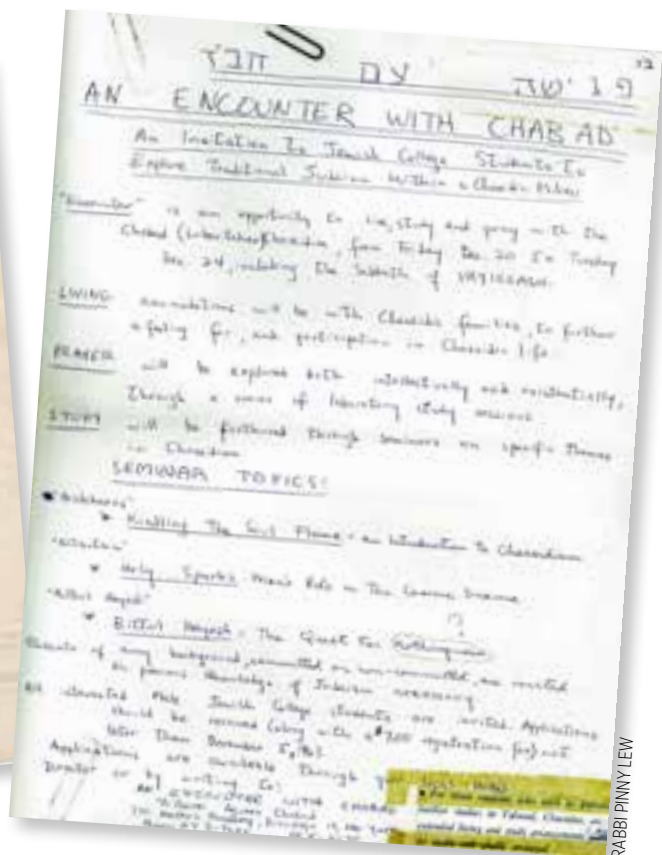
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BROCHURE FOR THE 1964 PEGISHA.



DRAFT OF THE FLYER FOR THE FIRST PEGISHA IN 1961 WITH A HAGAHA BY THE REBBE.

Early Beginnings

Jack Hanoka grew up in a traditional but non-religious Sephardic home, and the only Jewish education he ever received was in the few years leading up to his bar mitzvah. He attended college at Penn State where he first encountered a group of Lubavitcher Chassidim.

It was Shabbos Lech Lecha 5721* when a group of *bochurim* lead by Rabbi Berel Baumgarten came to spend a Shabbos at Penn. Rabbi Goldberg who was the Rabbi at Hillel had met Rabbi Binyomin Klein a few years earlier in Waco, Texas when he visited on Merkos Shlichus. Now, Rabbi Goldberg invited the Chassidim to come spend Shabbos with the students at Penn.

Inspired by the joy and upbeat spirit of the Chassidim, Jack traveled to New York to spend a Shabbos with the Rebbe. He entered *yechidus* with the Rebbe and shortly afterwards, he

joined the yeshiva in 770. The rest was history. Yaakov Hanoka became a Chossid and later went on to use his Torah knowledge and values to inspire many in the academic world. He was dubbed by the Rebbe as the "*Baal Teshuva Pioneer*." A full article about Professor Hanoka can be found in a previous magazine.¹

A few weeks after Yaakov came to learn in the yeshiva at 770, in the winter of 5721*, Rabbi Hodakov approached him and asked him whether he could arrange a program for students to learn in yeshiva during winter break. Yaakov replied that he didn't think that students would be ready to give up an entire vacation, but they might come for a weekend. Rabbi Hodakov told him to do it however he saw fit, and to work on it together with Shmuel Lew, another *bochur* studying in 770 at the time.

Yaakov and Shmuel began planning a special weekend for students. The

first item on the agenda was coming up with a name for the program. Being that "encounter" was a popular word among the spiritual-seeking crowd at the time, Yaakov suggested "An Encounter with Chabad." Translated into Hebrew, this became the famous "*Pegisha im Chabad*," or simply "Pegisha."²

Most of the expenses and the food were donated, and they received a \$25 budget from Tzach to cover the advertising and flyers (which, Dr. Hanoka later noted, was considered a lot at the time). They got their hands on a list of all the "Hillels" in the country, and mailed flyers to every single one.

Seventeen students showed up for that first Pegisha. This marked the beginning of one of the most iconic programs in Lubavitch history, which produced innumerable *baalei teshuvah* over the years.



DANCING AT THE PEGISHA, 5743.



L-R: RABBI YITZCHOK BLOCK, RABBI YAAKOV HANOKA, RABBI SHMUEL LEW.

Seeing the Rebbe

The Rebbe would give special attention to the visiting students at the Shabbos farbrengen and in the earlier years they would have *yechidus* as well. On numerous occasions, at the Shabbos farbrengen the Rebbe would say a *sicha* for the students and invite them to say *l'chaim*. In the later years, the students also had the *zechus* of receiving a dollar from the Rebbe on Sunday morning.

These were very special moments for the students, as they stood surrounded by thousands of Chassidim at the Rebbe's farbrengens. For three or four hours they would stand and listen, often not understanding much but being swept up by the power of the moment.

"In addition to the effect that the Pegisha had on the students, it had a tremendous impact on the families living in Crown Heights as well," recalls Rabbi Yosef Levertov, who

grew up in Crown Heights. "You have to remember that these were the years before the *mitzvot* were introduced, and the *hafatza* to the secular world was very limited: You might have sent *shemura matzah* to a few acquaintances, and the *bochurim* would go on Released Time, but the average Crown Heights family had very little interaction with secular Jews.

"But twice a year, when the Pegisha came around—there were no other Shabbatons in those days—we had the opportunity to host and help out the 'college-educated' students; we would explain them matters of Yiddishkeit, and so on. I have vivid childhood memories of bringing the students to 770 and my father discussing various topics with them at the Shabbos table. It was something that we looked forward to every year."

Speakers at the Pegishos would include Dr. Yitzchak Block, Rabbis Zalman Posner, Immanuel Shochet, Yitzchak Meir Kagen, Manis Friedman, Professor Velvel Greene, Dr. Judah Landes, Dr. Yaakov Brawer, and many others.

"I remember that at the Friday nights of the Pegishos," recalls Rabbi Yisroel Deren, "there were sometimes as many *bochurim* as there were students. We packed in to listen and learn. This was our opportunity to educate ourselves on how to speak to 'Americans.'

"As a young couple in the early 5730s*, my wife and I would visit different campuses for Shabbos but with no official place to stay we would have to be invited to the Hillel rabbi's home or to a student's apartment.

"The ultimate goal that we focused on was getting students to go to the annual Pegisha in Crown Heights. Our efforts were expended primarily during the first part of the year, so that we could maximize attendance for the upcoming Pegisha."

The Sichos to Pegisha

Rabbi Shmuel Lew relates: When the students would come to the farbrengen at the Pegisha, there was always a *sicha* that seemed to be addressed to them. Some prominent examples that come to mind:

In 5723*, the Rebbe spoke about the miracle of Chanukah, discussing the cultural battle between the Hellenistic intellectualism and the holiness of Yiddishkeit.³

In 5724*, the Rebbe discussed the idea of limitations of intellect and logic. The Rebbe said that this was expressed in the idea of a mental block: when one sits down to study, he cannot predict whether or not it will go in, whether it will click in his mind. Even in study, *siyaata dishmaya*, the help of Heaven, is needed which shows how intellect is not a predictable commodity, but needs help from the outside.

In 5725* (Shabbos Parshas Shemos), there was a fascinating *sicha* about radio-astronomy. The Rebbe said that people used to ridicule the *maamer chazal* that every blade of grass is connected to a planetary body in heaven—how can a planet, which is billions of light-years away, have any effect on a blade of grass on earth? But today, the Rebbe said, we know that there is a type of science studying planets that are so far from the earth that they cannot be seen by the best optical telescopes in the world. The only way we know they exist is because of radio-waves that have an effect on the earth. They still don't agree on *how* they have an effect from so far away—but that, too, will come with time...⁴

The Rebbe didn't say exactly what he was referring to, but after Shabbos he sent out a *tzetel* saying that the name of this science is radio-astronomy.

In 5728* (at the Pegisha for professors on Shabbos Parshas Shelach), the Rebbe delivered a seminal *sicha* on the topic of the *meraglim*. Just as the *meraglim* were frightened by the gigantic fruit, there was an entire generation of secular Jewish leadership of America who were frightened by the rebellious youth. They are giants, the Rebbe said: You can either become intimidated and run away, like the *meraglim* did, or you can take that energy and channel it into Yiddishkeit. The Rebbe foresaw and guided the *baal teshuva* movement as it was just beginning to blossom...⁵

The Midnight Farbrengens

"After Shabbos," Rabbi Shmuel Lew relates, "there would be a *melave malka* with the students, which later evolved into the midnight farbrengens with Dr. Yitzchak Block. These farbrengens would begin around midnight and continue until the wee hours of the morning."

"I remember how there were buses waiting for many people who would go directly from the farbrengen to Morristown," Dr. Block related, "in order to spend the day in yeshiva. A lot of people became *frum* through those late night and unofficial farbrengens."

The Rebbe would give Dr. Hanoka a bottle of *mashke* at the Shabbos farbrengen in connection with the Pegisha and Dr. Hanoka would often save the bottle for these special midnight farbrengens.

"In one of the earliest Pegishos," Rabbi Lew relates, "the students were asking Dr. Block many questions, and he answered every one of them—he was brilliant. Then, they asked him how he had become religious. He said, 'I'm not on a psychiatrist's couch,' and refused to answer the question.

"Later, the Rebbe heard about this, and sent him a *tzetel* telling him that he should say his story. That day at brunch, he related the entire story."

The Crowd

The wide-ranging group of students that attended the tri-annual Pegisha was largely made up of individuals hailing from two types of backgrounds.

One group was those that had developed somewhat of a connection with Lubavitch and Yiddishkeit through the shlichim visiting or living on campus. They had already warmed to the ideas and concepts of traditional Judaism and had been preparing for the encounter. The purpose and goal of them coming to Crown Heights



CIRCA 5721-5722, G. SCHUSTERMAN VIA JEW 303185



RABBI YITZCHOK BLOCK LEADS THE "MIDNIGHT FARBRENGEN".

was to solidify their connection and encourage them to move on to an all-encompassing program for *baalei teshuva*.

The second group was students who came to Crown Heights on their own. Curiosity, a friend, or simply responding to an advertisement is what brought this group to the Pegisha. These students were obviously far less knowledgeable in Yiddishkeit, if they knew anything at all. By the end of the three day program, with Shabbos being at the center, the objective was to have their souls ignited with a burning passion and a yearning to seek more. While still ensconced in the bubble of holy energy that the Pegisha provided, they were encouraged to take up the journey to follow their rediscovered heritage.

Feet on the Ground

Recognizing the feelings that swept over the young men and women throughout the Pegisha, the Rebbe placed a strong emphasis and encouraged time and again that students should leave the weekend with a concrete *hachlata*. This would take the impact of the Pegisha and keep it alive through the months and years to come.

At the first Pegisha in 5721*, the Rebbe instructed that no student should leave the Pegisha without his own pair of tefillin (at the time there were only male students in attendance). Of course this was a large expense but the organizers put in that extra effort to fulfill the Rebbe's directive and leave them

with something Jewish in a concrete manner.

In 5722*, the Rebbe asked that the students each receive their own pair of tzitzis to take with them after the Pegisha.⁶

For many students, the one *hachlata* they made at the Pegisha was the gateway to their eventual full return to Yiddishkeit:

Rabbi Kasriel Kastel joined Tzach in 5728*. From then on, he was one of the main organizers of the Pegisha.

Rabbi Kastel relates: "On my different trips to *yeshivos* and other places, I would often bump into an individual who would tell me that he became *frum* because of a *hachlata* he took on that weekend by the Rebbe. Rabbi Yisroel Rubin from Albany once gave a workshop on how to make tzitzis, and shortly afterwards I got a

call from a university that there was a guy walking around with tzitzis but no *yarmulke*... Now he's a Chassidisher Yid with children who are shluchim.

The Rebbe's Involvement

Unlike shluchim and *askanim* today, who have decades of inherited wisdom and collective experience to glean from, those involved with the Pegishos were forced to train on the job.

Throughout the years, the Rebbe provided close guidance to the organizers of the Pegisha. In the early years, when Dr. Hanoka was the one choosing all the themes and lecture topics, the Rebbe helped him in these decisions. One interesting *hora'a* he received was to use words like "atomic" in lecture titles in order to make them sound attractive.

As far as speakers, the general guideline from Rabbi Hodakov was

that they must be *shomer Shabbos*, but not necessarily Lubavitchers. In the earlier years, Dr. Hanoka would ask the Rebbe to suggest names, which he did. (One person the Rebbe sent was Dr. Nissan Mindel.)

The Rebbe would also look over every brochure published, though there usually weren't many edits. This prompted Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky to comment to Dr. Hanoka that "the Rebbe seems to have no problems with your brochures." (At a later stage, when Dr. Hanoka wasn't writing all the brochures anymore, the *hagahos* became much more frequent...)

One year, the organizers wanted to use the word "conclave" on the brochures that would be used in the marketing and subsequent recruitment of students. As with everything related to the Pegisha, the Rebbe reviewed this and made note:

ע"פ רוב מנוצלת לאסיפת כומרים וכיו"ב
תיבות אחרות ושכבר נשתמשו בהם.

"Generally, [the word conclave] is used at conferences of priests. Likewise, other words [should be avoided for this reason], even some that have been used in the past."

Rabbi Kastel relates: "One time, we went to a PR professional to think up a nice marketing twist for the brochures, and came up with the following title: 'Is Purim more like Halloween or Yom Kippur?' The point was that it's more like Yom Kippur.

"The Rebbe was very unhappy that we had even considered writing this. We had written that the brochure was edited by a few individuals, and the Rebbe commented:

[The Rebbe circled the word "edited" and added]:

?? האומנם לכהנ"ל שי לא איכפת כלל

לכלל "הצירוף" ב"ל ר"ל דשניהם הנ"ל?

פשוט שע[תה] צריך להשמידם מן העולם

לאחרי שיבדילו ממנו מה שהקפידו להתחילו

(למלאות ציווי ספר חסידים ב) ב"ה

??!! Did all of those individuals

[editors] *sheyichyu* not care at all about



RASKIN FAMILY ARCHIVES

Bringing in Shabbos Early

One challenge the organizers faced was scheduling the Pegisha in the months after Pesach. Rabbi Kasriel Kastel of Tzach, who was involved in arranging the Pegisha beginning in the late 5720s*, details the dilemma: "We always had a problem in the summer when Shabbos comes in much later, so we were unsure how to make a program during that time of year. At one point, Rabbi Zalman Shimon Dworkin told us that we can make the group meal earlier based on the *halacha* in Shluchan Aruch that one is allowed to bring in Shabbos early. When we sent in the schedule to the Rebbe, the response we got was that this is not our *minhag*. I understood it to mean that the students were coming to visit 'us' and therefore our standards should be held in place. That Shabbos, when Dr. Hanoka went up to the Rebbe to receive a bottle of *mashke* at the farbrengen, the Rebbe commented, 'I hope I didn't ruin your program...'"

Obviously, all these brochures must now be eradicated, after detaching the words B”H that you used to head the brochure (fulfilling the instruction of Sefer Chassidim).”

צ"ל ניכר (בהתכנית?) אשר Dec 23-24 -
חנוכה, Dec 31 - עשרה בטבת

“Add B”H at the top of the
Registration form.”

On campuses from Buffalo to Berkeley, the Chabad Houses have become focal points for Jewish students seeking anything from spiritual guidance to just a friendly face. ~~Thousands of Chabad students~~ In the East and the Mid-West, the numerous Chabad Institutes for Jewish college students have already educated many hundreds of alumni who ~~xxxxxx~~ now live a Jewish life replete with the beauty and warmth of our great heritage.

[illegible]

asked that the program also include the beginning and end times for the fast.)

Another example of the Rebbe's detailed involvement was when he told the organizers to freshen up the program from year to year:

בכלל - מכבר הגיע הזמן שהקאנונשען'ס
וכל כיו"ב לא יהיו העתקה מהקודמות במשך
עשירות שנים - כ"א א פרישע זאך

"In general, it's about time that the [programs at the] conventions and the like are not merely a copy of the previous ones, ongoing for tens of years—but [instead] should be a fresh thing."

Obviously, the Rebbe's involvement with the attendees wasn't only behind the scenes, and once the students set foot in Crown Heights

they experienced this first hand. It's interesting to note that for a short period of time the spring Pegisha was held in Morristown. The Rebbe indicated his displeasure with this, making it very clear that it was to take place in Crown Heights.

Boys and Girls

Rabbi Kastel relates: "In the early years of Pegisha, we held two separate weekends, one for the boys and one for the girls, one Shabbos after the other at the end of December, when they were off from school. At one point, shlichim were telling us that they couldn't come twice; it was too hard to leave their shlichus two weeks in a row, and the attendance was dwindling."

"Misplaced humility"

Throughout his life, Dr. Hanoka was reluctant to be the official speaker or center of attention at these events—he preferred to view himself as the chairman—"the simple man setting up the chairs"—but the Rebbe was always pushing him to put himself out there more.

In one response to a letter he had written, the Rebbe noted several names for speakers, and at the end of the letter added: "And the author of this letter too."

This dynamic was evident at other times as well. At the Rebbe's behest, Dr. Hanoka would write extremely detailed reports after each Pegisha; how each speaker performed, how they had been received, which parts of the event had been more organized and which less, which segments should be changed for the following year and which were successful. At the end of one of these reports, the Rebbe wrote a sharp *ma'ane* about the fact that he had neglected to mention his own role:

בכהנ"ל אינו מזכיר אף תיבה אחת ע"ד פעולותיו הוא! - ובמילא חסר בשלימות הדו"ח
וה"ז ענווה שלא במקומה
ונכון במאד מאד (אף שעתה הנוער אינו מתבלבל כ"כ עי"ז כבעבר - הרי נחוץ בשביל
המבוגרים. וגם להיות מוכן להנוער באם יתעורר מחדש עד"ז)

In all of the above, you do not mention a **single** word about your own activities! The report is therefore incomplete.

This is **misplaced** humility!

[In response to the question as to whether the speeches about Torah and science should be publicized, the Rebbe responded:] That would be very, very good. (Even though, **at present**, the youth is not as confused with this as in the past—it is important for the older people. It will also be available for the younger people, if it ever comes up again.)





“We made the decision to combine them into one event. Rabbi Hodakov called me in, and told me that now, ‘you have the responsibility for the *shidduchim*’. From then on we made sure to have a *shadchan* on our team of staff.

Pegisha for Professors

When speaking about Chabad *peulos* on campus we typically think about the students, however, an integral part of this *shlichus* is also reaching out to the faculty and staff. For this reason, a Pegisha weekend was created solely for the professors, during the summer (around Shavuot).

Rabbi Kastel was involved with this program as well and shares some memories:

“In 5728*, we decided to start a Pegisha for the professors, separate from the students, as we felt this would go down better. The Rebbe was involved with this as well and gave us a few names of people who should speak, for example: Rabbi Twerski from Harvard, Rabbi Twerski from Hoftsra, Professor Paul Rosenblum, and others. I have this distinctive memory of Professor Rosenblum lecturing about the deep and complex topic of *yesh me'ayin*. In true professor style, he was drawing a parallel between this subject and protons and electrons. Rabbi Zalman Posner was in ecstasy as he digested the words; all of us watching wore a blank face as we were completely lost by the terms and science he was quoting!”

One year, there was a program on Shaar Hayichud V’haemuna of Tanya, which discusses the profound philosophy of Chassidus on the creation of the world. Professor Rosenblum, who was a popular speaker at many of the *Pegishos*, and Rabbi Dovid Moshe Lieberman, both spoke about their understanding on the subject.



A REPORT TO THE REBBE ABOUT THE PREPARATIONS FOR THE PEGISHA FOR PROFESSORS, 5728. THE REBBE ADDED IN HIS KSAV YAD KODESH "המשך בכ"מ" - THANKS FOR THE GOOD NEWS. [WHAT WILL] THE ACTUAL CONTINUATION [BE]?"

In the beginning of Shaar Hayichud, the Alter Rebbe explains that Hashem creates the world through the letters of the *asara maamaros*, and Professor Rosenblum cited a metaphor from a concept in quantum mechanics called “creation annihilation operators.”

After the event, on Sunday night following Maariv, the Rebbe saw Dr. Hanoka and asked how it went. “*Baruch Hashem*,” he replied. To which the Rebbe responded, “We say ‘*baruch Hashem*’ for everything,” and asked for more details. Dr. Hanoka repeated Professor Rosenblum’s metaphor for the creation of the world from quantum mechanics. “I could tell that the Rebbe’s interest perked up enormously as soon as I started telling him about this,” Dr. Hanoka related. “I took this as an indication that—as he said at other times—the Rebbe felt that modern science could be very useful as a way of understanding abstract

ideas in Chassidus. This made quite an impression on me at the time.”

Respecting the Professors

The Rebbe’s answers on questions asked by the organizers regarding the Pegisha for professors:

The organizers wrote that the same people who had spoken at the Pegisha for students would be speaking at the Pegisha for professors. The Rebbe responded:

מובן שצריך להיות speakers נוספים - שהרי מזמינים המורים של students, והרי זה פגיעה בכבודם, שכאילו החליטו המזמינים שכולם ברמה אחת!

“Obviously there needs to be new speakers, because you are inviting the teachers of the students. It would be offensive to them, giving the impression that you believe they are all at the same level!”

They asked whether it should be publicized through Hillel, as had been



RABBI SHMUEL LEW ADDRESSES THE PEGISHA, 1964.

done for the students' Pegisha. The Rebbe replied:

לכאורה אינו לפי כבודם.

"It would seem that it wouldn't be respectful [to the professors]."

A Special Fund

Rabbi Nosson Gurary, longtime Shliach at the university in Buffalo recalls: "During the Pegisha, I would give a speech to the girls—not only those from Buffalo—to try getting them to attend Rabbi Feller's Beis Chana Institute in Minnesota, which was run by Rabbi Manis Friedman. One time, in the earlier years, I got up on a chair in front of the students and told a story about a man—Mr. Fefferbucks—who had passed away and left an endowment to sponsor any student who would go from this Shabbos directly to Minnesota. Everything would be paid for, including the tickets, but they must go directly to Minnesota. I don't know how I had the guts to do this, but that's what happened.

"I got them very enthused, and suddenly many, many girls were taking up the offer. I didn't know where I would get the money to pay for all of them, since in reality there was no Mr.

Fefferbucks! Where would I get the money?

"I wrote to the Rebbe and told him the whole story. The next thing I know, Rabbi Klein came out and told me that the Rebbe would cover the costs of all the tickets. This continued for several years. As far as the students were concerned, the "Fefferbucks Foundation" was sponsoring trips to Minnesota. In truth, the Rebbe was covering the costs. A tremendous amount of *baalei teshuva* came out of this program."

Yiddishkeit Alive

"I felt that the Pegisha was very powerful," says Rabbi Yosef Levertov. "When students see you on campus, they are seeing *you* as a *frumme* Yid, they see a rabbi doing religious stuff, but it doesn't sink in to them that Yiddishkeit is *alive*. When you bring them to New York, they see that there is a whole world of people who are *frum*, that it's normal to be *frum*. They also realize that they aren't the only students involved in Chabad—there are many others as well. That itself has a tremendous impact.

"Additionally, you always want students to be able to ask questions

and talk things out. At one point or another, they already know all of *your* answers, but in New York they can meet other people who have other perspectives and other stories. Pegisha had a real effect on people's entire lives..."

"We actually changed lives in the short time of a weekend," Dr. Hanoka said. "It was an extraordinary thing to see. There was a feeling I always had when I came to Crown Heights for the Pegishos: as soon as I got close to 770, as soon as I got on Eastern Parkway, a chill went up my spine. I would think about all the experiences I had here, what it meant to come here, what it meant to be having these weekends where we could literally change the lives of students.

"These students were often brought up in the same kind of environment I was. They were taught things which were totally different, and contrary, to the Torah's view about the meaning of life, what it means to be a Jew, and so forth. Very often, we found that we just had to tell people what it means to really be Jewish, and when they heard the truth, it made an immediate impression on them. It was pretty earth-shaking for a lot of these students to find out about this." ①

1. *The First of Thousands*, Derher Elul 5776.
2. Over the years, the Rebbe spoke many times about the name Pegisha, learning from it different *horaos* in *avodas Hashem*. See *Sefer Hasichos* 5749, vol. 1, p. 192.
3. *Toras Menachem* vol 35, p. 317. The *sicha* was later edited by the Rebbe and printed in *Talks and Tales*, 284.
4. *Toras Menachem* vol. 42, p. 109. The Rebbe began by explaining the custom of learning a Rashi each week (which the Rebbe had started a few weeks prior), saying that he would explain this custom because of the "פנים חדשות" (new people) at the farbrengen.
5. *Toras Menachem* vol. 53, p. 138.
6. As heard from Rabbi Lew. According to his recollection, the Rebbe instructed to use cotton tzitzis, to make it easier for them, though he adds that this point may not be accurate.