

# REB LEIBEL ZISMAN

The Sequel

**About a week after** *the Shvat* (2013) N'shei Chabad Newsletter was mailed out, my phone rang. It was Reb Leibel Zisman on the phone, and his wife Myrna. They had received a copy in the mail and were delighted with the review of Reb Leibel's book, *I Believe*. [To read the review, visit [nsheichabadnewsletter.com](http://nsheichabadnewsletter.com).]

Reb Leibel had one question. "Why didn't you call me? There's so much more to tell, things that are not in the book."

Things that are not in the book? Tempting. I suggested that maybe we could do a sequel. And so, on a sunny spring morning, Chaya Shuchat and I met with Reb Leibel Zisman in Crown Heights, and heard more from him; this time, "things that are not in the book..." -Rishe Deitsch

## ICE CREAM AND PIE

**W**hen I was a youngster, I was really wild. I doubt you can imagine how extremely wild I was. For example, if I had to get across the room, I would jump across the table, because it was a more direct route.

...My father put a lot of his *kochos* into raising us. For example, people would ask for appointments to come speak with him, either to raise money, or to discuss potential business deals, or something else. I remember him saying to someone who wanted to speak with him, "Come after 8:00, because from 7 to 8 I play with my children. Today I promised to take them sledding." We loved doing things with our father. I remember the joy of riding that sled over the snow in Kovno, Lithuania, with my father right there enjoying it too.

As wild as I was, my father didn't have to hit me for discipline. A stern look would suffice to make me regret what I had done. If he felt he had to punish, he would say, "Tonight, no story about the Rebbe Rayatz."



Reb Leibel Zisman at the home of NCN editor Rische Deitsch. Rabbi Mordechai Lipskier is listening intently.

[As told in the book, as a young boy, during the Holocaust, Leibel Zisman lost both his parents and his entire family except for one brother, *ybl"ch*, Reb Berel Zisman.]

After the war, I was invited to a *melaveh malkah* in Connecticut, as the speaker. I was a newcomer to this country, still a *bachur*. To me a *melaveh malkah* was herring and potatoes. But here they were serving pie a la mode.

I began telling of my experiences in Kovno, and in Auschwitz, and in the DP camp, but nobody was paying attention. Hot pie with cold ice cream was more interesting. As soon as I realized what was going on, I stopped in mid-sentence. The room became silent, everyone grew alarmed, and someone asked, "Do you need a doctor?"

"You need a doctor," I told them, and I walked out the door. What was wrong with people who were too busy eating to understand what had been done to our People? Babies were torn from their mothers' arms, entire families were shot, entire towns full of Jews were gassed, I had just witnessed it, but they didn't want to hear it. Maybe it made them feel guilty?

I think nowadays people are much more respectful of Holocaust survivors than they were 60 years ago. Today they put down their forks to listen. Maybe it's because so few of us are left.

## The Rebbe

I was always amazed in that regard, and I've heard the same from others, that when you spoke to the Rebbe [Rayatz], he made you feel that you were the only one in his world—each individual was made to feel very important, special. My aunt Tzivia, my mother's sister, used to learn Tanya regularly. When she had questions on the Tanya, she would write letters to the Rebbe Rayatz. The Rebbe replied to her letters in detail.

*Emunas tzadikim* is very important. We have to believe. I spoke once at Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin in Brooklyn. It is a Litvishe yeshivah and I am from Kovno, Lita. I speak their language. I told them, "I am alive because of a *brachah* from the Frierdiker Lubavitcher Rebbe. It says in Chumash, '*Vaya'aminu baShem ubeMoshe avdo.*' They believed in Hashem and in Moshe, His servant. Everybody needs to believe in *tzadikim*, Hashem's most loyal servants."

One time a man traveled to the Rebbe Maharash for a *brachah* for children. He had no children. He walked into *yehidus* with great seriousness. But when he came out, he was *b'simchah gedolah!* He was overjoyed! In fact, he was in a big rush. Why so happy, everyone asked him, and what's the rush?

“The Rebbe *bentched* me to have a *ben zachar*! I’m running to give my wife money to buy blankets and diapers and a cradle.” Nine months later, they had their *ben zachar*.

Another man also came to the Rebbe Maharash. He too was childless. He got the same *brachah* from the Rebbe, for a child. When he came out, he walked out slowly.

“Where are you going?” they asked him.

“I’m going home to say *Tehillim* and hope for the best,” he replied.

He did not have a child. The *bitachon* wasn’t there.

Chassidim used to have a *minhag* to dance with one another following *yechidus*. So great was their *simchah* and *bitachon* that the problems would now go away.

When you have *emunas tzadikim* you will be a very happy person. Because if you believe, then once the Rebbe says it, it is a given. It is already happening. You remember the part in the book [*I Believe* by Leibel Zisman] where my father insists that the Rebbe Rayatz has to give me a *brachah* to survive. As soon as he gave the *brachah*, my father was relieved. He knew I would make it. So too in the DP camp after the war, as soon as I had the dream where my parents told me my brother Berel was still alive, I became happy. *You have to believe*. It is so important to believe that I named my book *I Believe*.

I once asked the Rebbe [in the 1980s] to help me with a court case, to give me a *brachah*. The Rebbe replied that it would be good. I walked out a happy man, and first thing I did is to call my lawyers and tell them the good news, “Don’t work too hard. We won.” The next day in court my opponent stood up first and said, “What are we fighting for? I’ll give you \$5,000 and let’s forget the whole thing.” I right away agreed. My lawyers couldn’t believe it. *They* were suing us for tens of thousands. But the Rebbe had said it would be good. This was good. I settled for the \$5,000 and walked out a happy man.

*Yisroel b’tach baShem, ezram umaginam Hu.* The Jew

*who believes* in Hashem, He is their help and their protector. Believe in Hashem, and believe in His servant the Rebbe, the Moshe Rabbeinu of our generation.

Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson once told me, “Speak to the Rebbe like you would to your father. Don’t rely on his *ruach hakodesh*. Tell him straight out what is going on with you, and what you need. Be honest.” I have always tried to do that, even today when I visit the Ohel.

## WEDDING BLESSING

At my wedding, my *kallah* and I stood in front of the Rebbe to receive his blessing. “You are good at calculations,” said the Rebbe with a smile, remembering that I had studied and taught math years earlier. “Calculate for yourself a good life!”

## ALWAYS TAKE OUT INSURANCE

I always used to bring the Rebbe *ma’aser*, to be used *al daas haRebbe*, as the Rebbe sees fit. One time I undertook a construction job that was very risky. I wasn’t at all sure that I would come out with a profit. I was dealing with the unions, they were picketing, and it was rough. I decided not to wait

to give *ma’aser*. I

approached the Rebbe’s office holding a bag of cash, and handed it to Rabbi Binyomin Klein.

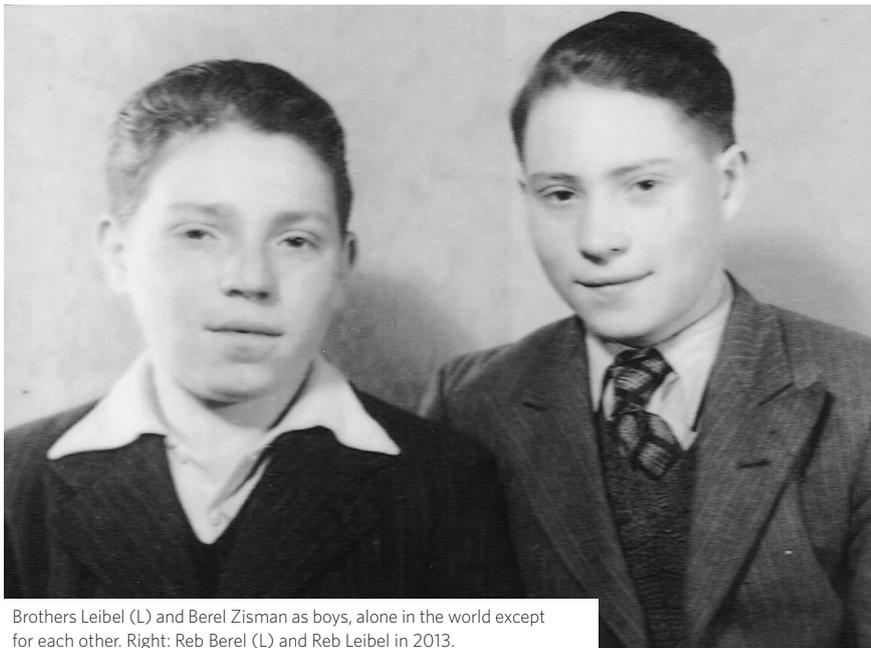
“But you were just here recently with your *ma’aser*,” said Rabbi Klein.

“This time I am bringing the *ma’aser* before the job; I’m taking out insurance on the deal.”

When the Rebbe heard what the delivery was about, he smiled and said to Rabbi Klein, “It’s a good idea. Everyone should do that.” And then he told Rabbi Klein, “Tell the Zisman brothers they will succeed and all *narishkeiten* will disappear.”

We made more money on that “risky” project than we had ever made before on any project. The picketers were cutting wires at night and making our lives miserable, causing the FBI to get involved. At first when I saw

As soon as he gave  
the brachah, my father  
was relieved. He knew I  
would make it.



Brothers Leibel (L) and Berel Zisman as boys, alone in the world except for each other. Right: Reb Berel (L) and Reb Leibel in 2013.



the FBI guys, I was scared. But then when they started talking to me, I realized they were on my side and were only there to make sure the picketers didn't vandalize. My problems were over.

### GARTEL

The Rebbe told me to wear a *gartel* when I *daven*, which is what *chassidim* do. When the Rebbe heard that I was not davening in a *chassidische* shul, he told me it was okay to wear it under my jacket, but always to wear a *gartel* to daven.

### BIRTHDAY

Every year Erev Yom Kippur, I would go past the Rebbe to ask for *lekach*. At the same time, I would tell the Rebbe that it was my birthday on Yom Kippur. One year I didn't say it. I couldn't bring myself to say, "*Leibke der grob yung kumt betten a brachah.*" But Rabbi Groner rushed after me and called me back. The Rebbe remembered, and sent Rabbi Groner to pass on to me a birthday message.

### LIKE A FATHER

My father was killed by the Nazis, may their names be erased, when I was 13. You can read the entire story in my book. But as soon as I got to the U.S. and met the Rebbe, he said to me, "When you need something, you come to me."

And so it was. The Rebbe was like a father to me. I always

felt his love, like the love of a father. He guided me, kept me in line, was proud of me when I did something good, wished me well with his whole heart, *davened* for me... and understood me completely. (I was a *vilde chaya* and he knew it.) In fact the Rebbe was born the same year as my father was.

One time in my early years I stood up to daven for the *amud* and the Rebbe asked me quietly, "Did you already say *korbonos*?" I had not. But ever since then I have not skipped *korbonos*.

Recently, I was diagnosed with a dreaded illness. I went to the Rebbe's Ohel at 3 a.m. That's when it's nice and peaceful there, and I can talk undisturbed. The Rebbe can always listen; he's a Rebbe. But I'm limited. I can't talk to the Rebbe when the crowds are there. So I like to go at 3 or 4 in the morning. I have my own key to the *mikvah* for just such occasions. When I went to the Rebbe after receiving this diagnosis, I reminded the Rebbe, "You said when I need something, I should come to you. Here I am. I need a *refuah shelaimah.*"

The next day, Chai Elul, I was in the doctors' waiting room (one of the worst places to spend time when you're not feeling well). I waited over an hour and the anxiety was growing until it took on a life of its own. Thank G-d I had a *Chayenu* with me [[chayenu.org](http://chayenu.org)]. And the letter from the Rebbe that was in there for that day said, "I am responding right away due to the urgency of the matter... regarding the work you do to be *mekarev* other Yidden, continue to do it... Listen to the doctors and all will be well."

(I work for Birthright, taking groups of young men and women to Israel and to the concentration camps. I try to show them that they cannot intermarry; that they have to be true to who they really are. This is my work, being *mekarev Yidden*.)

## LUBAVITCHER THROUGH AND THROUGH

In the Kovno ghetto, I remember my father saying a *maamar* at the *shalosh seudos minyan*, after *minchah*. There was barely a piece of *challah* to eat; the whole point of the *shalosh seudos* was the *maamar*. This was at a table with many *misnagdim*. My father wanted them to hear some Chassidus.

My father was very strong about *davening* only *Nusach Ari*, even in the ghetto. With literal *mesiras nefesh*, they would take the *sefer Torah* out of its hiding place to *layen*. Anyone caught with a *sefer Torah* would be killed.

If there was no *minyan davening Nusach Ari* in the ghetto, my father would join a different *minyan*, answer amens and hear *kriah*, then *daven* by himself *Nusach Ari*. That's how important his identity as a Lubavitcher *chossid* was to him.

## SHIUR IN TELZ

Telz (also spelled Telshe) was a nondescript village in Lithuania (Lita). Its claim to fame was its large yeshivah, founded in 1875.

Once a week there was a *mussar shiur* at night. It did not focus on how much one could accomplish through one's *avodah*. Rather, it emphasized how low one was and how very far one had to go. The best way to understand the difference between *mussar* and Chassidus is through a *mashal*. The elements were arguing over the best way to get a man to take off his coat. The wind could blow hard and get the man's coat off, but the man would be struggling and fighting the wind, because he was cold and needed a coat. The sun, just by shining warmly, got the man to take off his coat with no struggle at all.

I had a cousin, Leibel Mintz, son of Reb Pinye Azaritzer, who learned in Telz. He also loved *Tanya*. He spoke to the Alter of Telz, and asked, "There are so many boys here from *chassidishe* homes; would it be alright to have a *Tanya shiur* once a week in addition to the weekly *mussar shiur*?"

The Alter of Telz agreed. The *shiur* began with two students. Within a short time, there were 30 regulars.

One of them was my Danish cousin Nochum Gutworth, a brilliant young man who spoke several languages. When the Communists occupied Lithuania, his penchant for languages became a lifesaver. He translated for many people, thus saving their lives. He represented countless Jews to

Chiune Sugihara, who was then able to write them visas so they could leave Lithuania and go to Japan.

## TEHILLIM ON SHABBOS MEVORCHIM

Many Lubavitchers think this is standard worldwide practice among all types of Jews, and going on since the Baal Shem Tov, but it's not. The Frierdiker Rebbe, the Rayatz, established the practice of Yidden saying the whole *Tehillim* with a *minyan* every Shabbos Mevorchim before *shacharis*, saying this would bring blessing to those who do it from the Source of all blessing.

In *Hayom Yom* of 25 Shvat, the Rebbe writes that we must be scrupulous about saying the entire *Tehillim* on Shabbos Mevorchim, concluding, "It is crucial for you, your children and your children's children."

After the tragedy of 911, our (non-Chabad) shul discussed what to do in response, for the *neshamos* of all those who were killed. I suggested that we begin saying the whole *Tehillim* together every Shabbos Mevorchim at 7:30 in the morning. I offered to provide refreshments.

The Rov said he would think it over.

He came back with a question for me: How about every Shabbos? Not just Shabbos Mevorchim?

I asked my brother Berel what he thought of this. He thought the Rov wasn't comfortable taking on what is clearly a Lubavitcher *minhag* so he wanted to spread it around to all the Shabbosim of the month.

"Say yes to him," urged Berel. "It's worth it."

And so it was established.

I will never forget my little first cousin Dvosha. She was very young but spoke and read beautifully. My father used to say to her, "*Dvoshele, zog Tehillim un Ich'l dir geben a nosh.*" Dvosha was murdered by the Nazis, may their names be erased.■

---

*Not long after this interview, Reb Leibel fell down some stairs while paying a shivah call, and was niftar four weeks later on 14 Sivan. Reb Leibel Zisman's Shlichus was to speak to groups (frum or not frum) about his life experiences. Many times people who heard him speak began putting on tefillin or, for the first time, understood why they should not marry out of our faith, G-d forbid. Credit goes to Reb Leibel's brother ybl"ch Reb Berel Zisman, the latter's wife Judy, their son Reb Shraga, and Yedida Wolfe of the N'shei Chabad Newsletter for correcting and perfecting what was only a rough draft at the time Reb Leibel left us.*

*To buy I Believe by Reb Leibel Zisman, visit your local Judaica store or [meaningfullife.com](http://meaningfullife.com) or Amazon.*