

When There Were Two People At Hakafos: The Rav and His Wife

From Rebbetzin Chana's Memoirs

A short while after reaching the United States, the Rebbe's mother, Rebbetzin Chana Schneersohn, began to write her memoirs. Transcribed in Yiddish, these accounts fill two entire notebooks. The first notebook, written between the years 5708-5709 (1948-9), contains the life story, imprisonment and ultimate passing of her esteemed and illustrious husband Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Schneersohn. The second notebook, written between the years 5710-5723 (1950-1963), is of a more personal nature and contains various stories, anecdotes and feelings which were weighing on her mind at the time.

At one point the Rebbetzin presented the first part to an acquaintance for typing and editing. Afterwards, she examined these pages and made some small corrections in her handwriting.

The Rebbetzin also sent a copy to her sister-in-law, Mrs. Rachel Schneersohn (wife of Reb Sholom Shlomo, brother of Reb Levik). This copy was seen by a handful of *chassidim* in Eretz Yisroel, including Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin (who noted that it was "written with brilliance and precision"), Reb Ahron Yaakov Diskin, and Reb Chanoch Glitzenstein.

It seems that these memoirs reached the Rebbe only after the passing of his mother, the author. A folder was found in the Rebbe's house containing these writings in typed form. On the folder was written, in the handwriting of Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka, "Memoirs - Mother-in-law, Chana Meirovna Schneersohn." (The name Meirovna refers to her father, Rabbi Meir Shlomo Yanovsky.)





Rabbi Levi
Yitzchak
Schneerson
JEM Photo
#2973

CONTENTS

The Rebbetzin opens with the following words: “I am not a writer, nor the daughter of a writer. My desire is only to record some memories of my husband of blessed memory from the last years of his life.”

Despite the modesty of the above statement, these narratives make up a veritable treasure of testimony shedding light on the life of Reb Levik and the Rebbetzin. Upon reading it, one becomes aware of the many hardships they faced, starting from the arrest and imprisonment of Reb Levik in the year 5699 (1939), and up until his *histalkus* in 5704 (1944). Their strength of spirit and their self-sacrifice, even in the most difficult of circumstances, are apparent within these accounts.

The Rebbetzin writes of the days when Reb Levik served as Rav of Yekatrinoslav, describing at length the manner in which he led the city’s Jewish community. She

speaks of his lofty character coupled with a vast knowledge in both the revealed and hidden aspects of the Torah.

The Rebbetzin also reveals many facts and stories concerning the childhood of her son the Rebbe. In her words, already as a very young child, the Rebbe impressed all those who saw him with his unique wisdom and capabilities. Here the Rebbetzin shares the immense pride she derived from the Rebbe’s global activities and from witnessing the boundless love and admiration of the *chassidim* toward him.

The memoirs are permeated with an intense feeling of loneliness brought about by the loss of her husband, as well as a desire to perpetuate his memory by—among other things—publishing his writings which were left behind the Iron Curtain.

Despite all the losses and sorrow she lived through, Rebbetzin Chana was comforted by the tremendous joy she received from her great and noble son, the Rebbe, whose precious daily visits infused her with new life.

THE FESTIVE MONTH OF TISHREI WITH THE RAV

The following story is recorded in the Rebbetzin’s memoirs, Part 26, describing



the celebration of Yom Kippur and Simchas Torah in Yekatrinoslav during the difficult years of the communist regime, before Reb Levik was arrested:

EARLY MORNING MINYAN, AND BACK FOR NE'ILAH

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur fell on weekdays when the congregants were required to report for work. My husband arranged an early “first *minyan*” which completed its services by 8:00 a.m., after which its participants went straight to work.

On Yom Kippur, however, they didn't go home after work but returned to shul in time for *ne'ilah*. For this service the shul was overcrowded, with many forced to stand outside. Everyone was exhausted from the fast and from having walked long distances. The physical strain was in addition to the spiritual agony from their awareness of the exalted day on which they had had to work, besides the heartbreakingly emotional prayers of the *chazzanim*...

The congregants expressed heartfelt thanks to my husband for making it possible for them to participate in congregational prayers on the High Holy Days...

Copious tears poured down my husband's face as they spoke to him about this. Deriving intense satisfaction from their spiritual inspiration, he would comment with joy, “Oh, how special Jews are!”

We were afraid to discuss such subjects very much. But my husband was pleased to have accomplished all this.

BREAKING THE FAST

When my husband would return home after Yom Kippur, he couldn't easily settle back into the everyday mundane existence. After coming home quite late in the evening he drank only a glass of tea. Then he remained sitting, still garbed in the *kittel* and the *gartel* of his great-great-grandfather, the Tzemach Tzedek, to lead

a *farbrengen* until two or three o'clock in the morning.

This was his regular custom on the evening after Yom Kippur, both when Jewish life had been less constricted and later when Judaism could be practiced almost solely within the confines of one's own home.

Some of our friends were aware of my husband's custom, and they would eat a quick evening meal with their families before coming to our home. My husband would deliver a *chassidische maamar* on subjects connected with the Yom Kippur prayers. In later years he spoke about the great qualities of Jews, their self-sacrifice to observe Judaism, and how they expressed their love towards other Jews in that difficult era.

Ten or 15 men always attended this *farbrengen*, which included dancing as enthusiastic as on *Simchas Torah*.

SIMCHAS TORAH

Our spacious apartment had been confiscated by the authorities in 1929. The small official community that still existed in our city at the time built us an apartment of three small rooms in a privately owned property, because we were not permitted to reside anywhere else.

Notwithstanding our small apartment, any Jew in the entire city who wished to rejoice on Yom Tov came to our home. After dark, young people would stealthily arrive as well. Due to the cramped conditions and the fact that none of our visitors wanted anyone else to know he was visiting the Rav, each one tried to hide from everyone else. They would visit in small groups, and my husband spent time with each person separately so that, during the time they spent with him, they were able to forget which country they lived in and under whose regime.

As a result of the holiday prayers and the *farbrengens*, the *chazzan's* attitude had changed from his original ulterior motive of earning money to a genuine heartfelt expression, which impacted and stirred all the congregants. He declared that his positive transformation was thanks solely to the Rav.

DANCING WHILE WEEPING

Following the departure of the *chazzanim*, I received a letter from them. After thanking me for various things, they wrote: “This is the first time in our lives we have witnessed such a phenomenon like the Rabbi of Yekatrinoslav, who, even as he rejoiced on Yom Tov with such extraordinarily joyous dancing, was weeping with such indescribable tears. Yet the tears impelled him to dance even more energetically!”

THE VERY STONES WERE DANCING

The following story is recorded in the Rebbetzin's memoirs, Part 12, describing the celebration of Simchas Torah in exile in Chi'li in the year 5703:

It was Simchas Torah, [but] we didn't yet have a Torah in our possession. Our guest who ate his Yom Tov meals with us had found work as a night watchman and had to spend his nights in the fields guarding the produce, so now he could come only during the day. Thus, only I was present with my husband in our room at night.

The time of *hakafos* arrived. It is most difficult for an ordinary person like me to describe my husband's emotional experience, as was evident on his face. He started reciting the customary verses preceding the actual *hakafos* – *Ata horesa ladaas ki Hashem Hu haElokim, ein od mil'vado*—using the same tune he used back at home [in Dnepropetrovsk], when he celebrated *hakafos* in shul together with many hundreds of Jews. The following night, he used to celebrate *hakafos* in our home with several dozen of those close to him. Whether at shul or at our home, it was not just [his] dancing—it seemed like the very paving stones danced along to his joy.

Here, too, he enveloped himself with such joy. He recited every verse, and after every circuit he sang and danced, alone, to the melody known in our hometown as “the Rav's melody.” He circled

around in the narrow space in our room between his bed and the table, reciting the verses of the *hakafos*:

“...Pure and upright One, please save us... Benevolent One and Bestower of goodness, answer us on the day we call.”

He wanted this to be pure joy, and his deep emotion was manifest in the words he recited:

“He who knows thoughts, please save us... He who is garbed in righteousness, answer us on the day we call.”

This was a most difficult experience for me to endure. Sitting on a wooden stool in the corner, I observed the immensity and intensity of my husband's love of the Torah as he danced away all the seven *hakafos*.

Following *hakafos* on Simchas Torah morning, he recited *Sissu v'simchu b'simchas Torah* [“Rejoice and exult in the joy of the Torah...”] with similar enthusiasm.

[To view the Rebbe singing his father's *hakafos niggun*, please visit nsheichabadnewsletter.com home page. –Ed.]

The following story is recorded in the Rebbetzin's memoirs, Part 34, describing Reb Levik's reaction to the news of the histalkus of his Rebbe, the Rebbe Rashab:

THE PASSING OF THE REBBE RASHAB ON BEIS NISSAN, 5680 (1920)

This day always brings back memories. It's already 32 years, I believe,



The Rebbe
as a child.
JEM ID
#102414



since the passing of the Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom DovBer of Lubavitch, of blessed memory.

I remember when the news arrived. Generally, contact by mail or railway was very poor. Nevertheless, in this instance, we learned about it on the day it happened.

I have no words to describe the impact of this news. It felt as if our whole life had stopped. That's how it was in our home, and for those who were close to us, and particularly among members of the Lubavitch community. My husband, of blessed memory, wept aloud, something he almost never did.

...Right away, more than 20 men came to our home and brokenheartedly sat shivah, weeping intensely.

I recall how an engineer named Y. L. Koren came in. He was *ah freirer in dayos* (a freethinker) and thoroughly irreligious. Nevertheless, seeing how everyone, young and old, together with my husband—whom he described as having an exceptionally stalwart character—were all so brokenhearted, he wept together with them.

He told me that although he was such a total freethinker, nevertheless, when he learned that the personage who held such a sacred position among Jews, and to whom his followers were so devotedly attached, had passed away, he felt compelled to weep together with them, feeling their same sense of loss. Even when he left our home, he couldn't calm down and cried hysterically in the street.

THE REBBE'S PURE CHILDHOOD

The following stories are recorded in the

Rebbetzin's memoirs, Part 33, describing the Rebbe's years as a young child, including an account of the day of his bar mitzvah:

Praise and thanks to G-d, and to my son Mendel, long may he live, that I have reached this point. Not for nothing is honoring one's parents rewarded with long life. As recompense for the way my son relates to me and makes my life so much easier, may G-d grant him long life and happy years, with good health and success, and may he never experience anything negative. Amen.

To state that my son is saintly and pure is no exaggeration.

I recall the years when he grew up, from early childhood onwards. When he turned two, he was able to ask the Four Questions on Pesach, although his mode of speech was like a child of that age.

When he turned three, he was, first of all, quite simply very beautiful, with long blond locks, which I stored away on leaving home [to join my husband] in 1940. They were lost, together with all our other possessions [during the upheaval of World War II].

When I walked with my son in the street, people would stop to gaze at him.

“DALOI SAMADERZHAVIA!”

During the 1905 pogroms in Russia, we were among a group of women and children who hid in a pharmacy. It was dangerous for us to be discovered. Other children of his age or even older were crying and making noise. But he controlled himself to the extent that not only didn't he cause any problems but he also influenced other children to be quiet.

The people there, and the pharmacist, who kept on coming in to check on us, spoke about my son with amazement. He was just three years old at the time.

Before the pogrom, my son would walk around at home calling out [in Russian] “*Daloi Samaderzhavia!*” (“An end to the autocracy!”) He had heard people mouthing this slogan, and seemed to understand that Jews, too, were suffering as a result of the autocracy.



The Rebbe and his mother, reunited in Paris in 1947. JEM ID #105332

I remember how my father, of blessed memory, was fearful that he might be overheard, and told him to stop saying it.

[Our son Mendel] started his studies in cheder which continued until we commissioned special teachers to teach him at home. What a pleasure that was!

There was something special about him. At every turn, we seemed to find reason to take pride in him. Not that he desired to be noticed. On the contrary, he always tried to avoid that. But his personality just evoked respect.

“MY SON, MAY HE LIVE AND BE WELL...”

The following thoughts are recorded in the Rebbetzin’s memoirs, Parts 35-36, describing the great nachas she was privileged to derive from the Rebbe and the new life she felt with his visit to her home each day:

...Just now, my son—long may he live, and may he be well and successful—left my apartment. He is very fatigued, yet he still took with him lots of work to do at home.

Since childhood, he has spent his time in constant study. I don’t remember him ever wasting time. Thank G-d, I derive a great deal of *nachas* from him.

He is a truly great personage, with a pure soul. He does much for my sake, which I consider to be a privilege, after all the tribulations I have experienced...

...My son—long may he live—has just left my apartment. This gives me life for the 24 hours until tomorrow’s visit, G-d willing.

THE PLEASURE OF PARTICIPATING IN THE REBBE’S FARBRENGEN

... I have not written lately, because I also haven’t been in the best of health. Now, thank G-d, I feel much better. I don’t want to let pass the opportunity to record the pleasure I enjoyed last night listening to my son, *shlita*, speaking to an audience of many hundreds of people. I am not the expert to appraise the scholarship of the subjects on which he spoke, but the portion I did understand made a deep impression upon me with its rich content. ❁



The English translation of the Rebbetzin’s memoirs, ***Memoirs of Rebbetzin Chana Schneersohn***, is published and copyrighted by Kehot Publication Society. The excerpts this article is based on were taken with permission

from ***A Chassidisher Derher*** magazine. To subscribe, visit derher.org.



GITTY BRONSTEIN, LCSW

Licensed Clinical Social Worker

Adult, Adolescent
& Child Psychotherapist

917 446 5444
gittybron@gmail.com