



With Privilege Comes Responsibility

Memories of Rebbetzin Chana

Mrs. Esther Sternberg

Over 40 years ago, we started the *neshek* campaign, to encourage women and girls to light Shabbos candles. When *mitzva neshek* was first started, we were a branch of N'shei Chabad and our bills were paid by the Rebbe's office.

When we printed our first candle-lighting brochure, the various expenses came out to \$4,000. I submitted the bill to the Rebbe's office as usual, and expected a check within a few days. I needed this money to pay the printer, the designer, the photographer, etc. I called Rabbi Hodakov, the Rebbe's secretary, to find out what was holding up the funds. Rabbi Hodakov told me that he needed to speak to me in person and asked me to come to his office.

When I arrived in his office Rabbi Hodakov started to tell me, "Do you know what a great *zechus* you have to start an institution that is giving the Rebbe so much *nachas*?" Now, this was strange as Rabbi Hodakov was not known to give compliments. He would

always demand more and more. He went on and on, telling me how privileged I was and how lucky I should feel to have been given this *zchus*. He really laid it on thick. By now I knew something was up.

Finally he said, "You should know that with every great *zchus* comes responsibility. From now on you will be responsible to raise money for *mitvza nesbek* yourself."

I took that lesson to heart and I have tried to live with it. I had the *zchus* to know Rebbetzin Chana from the time I was four years old. Since I was given that *zchus*, I feel a responsibility to share a little of what I remember and the lessons I learned from her.

The Rebbe's Tekios

I was four years old when Rebbetzin Chana came to America. My mother, Rebbetzin Chava Gurary, was a very warm, friendly person and was worried that Rebbetzin Chana might be lonely in America. She started to visit the Rebbetzin every Shabbos and took me along. At that age I was not aware of who the Rebbetzin was but I was there every Shabbos and we became close.

On Rosh Hashanah we would daven in 770. The women's shul was very small and it was not possible to hear the *tekios* from inside. The only way we could hear was to stand on a little porch outside of 770. One year we were standing on the porch as usual but it was still very difficult to hear the *tekios*. The Rebbe was the *baal tokei'a* and we knew that if the Rebbe had difficulty blowing the *tekios*, it was not for a physical reason but for a spiritual reason. My mother was standing right next to Rebbetzin Chana and saw that the Rebbetzin was having much heartache over the fact that the Rebbe was having a hard time with the *tekios*.

My mother's heart went out to the Rebbetzin, so, to ease her distress, she said, "The *tekios* sounded wonderful!"

The Rebbetzin turned to her and asked, "You heard something?"

My mother answered, "Yes, I heard, and they were wonderful." She wanted the Rebbetzin to be reassured.

Walking with Malchus

One year before Rosh Hashanah, I met the woman who used to bring the Rebbetzin to shul. She called me over and said, "Esther, this year I'd really like to *daven* like a *mentsch*. Would you mind going at 11 a.m. to pick up the Rebbetzin?" This was no burden but rather a great honor and of course I immediately agreed. At 11 a.m. I knocked on the door, and the Rebbetzin peeked through the peephole and invited me inside. She was not yet dressed for shul, as she did not get ready until she was sure that someone would be able to bring her.

She told me to wait in the dining room while she got ready. I sat at the table and saw a telegram on the table in front of me. I was not snooping; the telegram was displayed openly. It was sent from Liverpool, England, and said, "*Shanah tovah umesukah* from Leibel, Regina and Dalia." Rebbetzin Chana's youngest son, the Rebbe's brother Reb Yisroel Aryeh Leib, lived in Liverpool, England, with his wife and daughter. Reb Yisroel Aryeh Leib passed away in 1952. However, the Rebbetzin had suffered many losses and tragedies in her life and the Rebbe did not want her to know about the death of her youngest son. Every year he would arrange for a telegram to be sent from Liverpool, England, so the Rebbetzin would think that her son was still alive. The Rebbe continued this for many years, until the passing of the Rebbetzin. I brought the Rebbetzin to shul on Rosh Hashanah for many years, and each time I saw a new telegram on the table.

When the Rebbetzin was ready, she called me into her room. She was putting on her hat over her *sheitel* and asked me to attach the pin into the *sheitel* so it wouldn't

fall off. I was terrified to stick the pin in because I wasn't sure how deeply it should go. The Rebbetzin told me not to worry, and since she needed help I placed the pin in the *sheitel* with trembling hands.

I then walked, slowly, arm in arm with the Rebbetzin, for the few blocks from her apartment building at 1414 President Street to 770. The feeling was indescribable; I knew I was escorting royalty. When we arrived in 770 everyone stood up to welcome her and she went to her seat.

Mystical Brachos

One Shabbos I saw the Rebbetzin walking around on Kingston Avenue as if she was looking for something. I stopped her and asked, "*Rebbetzin, ir darft epes?*" Do you need anything?

The Rebbetzin answered gently, "Yes, there is something I need very badly." She explained that this Shabbos was an *aufruf* and she was very close to both sides of the family. The *chassan* was Berel Raskin, today the owner of Raskin's Fish Market. His mother was Mrs. Doba Raskin of Raskin's Fruits. The *kallab* was Esther Lipsker, and at the time her father owned a grocery store on the corner of Union and Kingston. The *aufruf kiddush* was going on at the time but it was for men only, so the Rebbetzin had no way to wish *mazel tov* to the couple.

The Rebbetzin asked me, "Just take me past the stores and I will give them a *brachab*." Obviously nobody was in the stores at the time as it was Shabbos. But I walked the Rebbetzin past the shuttered fruit store and grocery store, and she prayed fervently for a few moments, giving the *chassan* and *kallab* her heartfelt best wishes. There was something very spiritual and surreal about the whole episode. Nobody except she and I knew about these blessings. Years later when I started teaching in Bais Rivkah, I wanted to give my students a glimpse of who Rebbetzin Chana was and I shared this story. That's how the Raskin and Lipsker families learned about the great gift they were given the Shabbos before their wedding.

"I Want to Go to the Wedding!"

In the 1950's and 60's, Crown Heights was a very diverse Jewish community and the majority were not Chabad. There was a young woman from the Lower East Side of Manhattan who *davened* in the shul of my grandfather, the Kopitchinitzer Rebbe. She was getting married and had rented an

Image: Rebbetzin Chana is standing in front of 770 against the bricks, between two women, and smiling. Mrs. Chava Gurary is in the far right corner. The little girl in a coat whose back is seen is Esther Sternberg. Next to her, the child in a snow suit is Esther's brother Nossan, leaning against her other brother Itche Meir.

apartment in the Rebbetzin's building. The Rebbetzin was very friendly and warmly welcomed this young woman. They would chat sometimes when they met going in or out of the building. The young woman was very touched at the attention the Rebbetzin paid her and gave the Rebbetzin an invitation to her wedding in Manhattan. The Rebbetzin promised to come, and the girl was so proud and pleased. She told my mother that the Rebbetzin was coming to her wedding.

Well. When my mother found out about this she was very perturbed. She knew the *kallah* and her mother meant well by inviting the Rebbetzin, but were they aware of what kind of strain it would be for her? The wedding was in middle of winter, in Manhattan. In those days there were no car services. You had to stand in middle of the street and flag down a yellow cab. And how would the Rebbetzin get home after the wedding? She decided to call the *kallah's* mother and set her straight. She called her at home and found out that she was in her daughter's apartment setting up.

My mother called the apartment, reached the *kallah's* mother and explained the situation. Surely she did not realize how difficult it would be for the Rebbetzin to attend her daughter's wedding. The *kallah's* mother said, "You're so right. We gave the Rebbetzin an invitation because we thought it was a nice gesture. What should we do now?"

My mother urged the *kallah's* mother to call the Rebbetzin, thank her very much for her good wishes and tell her that she didn't expect her to *shlep* out to Manhattan for the wedding. Instead, perhaps the *chassan* and *kallah* could come over before the wedding for a *brachah*.

The *kallah's* mother thanked my mother for letting her know the right thing to do.

My mother hung up, and two seconds later her phone rang. The Rebbetzin was on the line.

"Why does it bother you that I want to do the *mitzvah* of being *mesame'ach* a *chassan* and *kallah*?"

"Why do you think it bothers me?" my mother stammered.

The Rebbetzin explained that when she had picked up her phone to make a

call, the lines got crossed (not unusual in those years) and she could hear my mother talking to the *kallah's* mother and telling her how hard it would be for the Rebbetzin to come. "I really want to go to this wedding; it is a very big *mitzvah*; why did you try to interfere?"

My mother apologized to the Rebbetzin and assured her that she would make all the arrangements. She called back the *kallah's* mother and told her that the Rebbetzin really wanted to go. She asked her to please arrange transportation for the Rebbetzin to Manhattan and back. The *kallah's* mother did so happily, and the Rebbetzin graciously attended the wedding.

Keep in mind that this girl was not Lubavitch, and the Rebbetzin did not know her all that well. She was just someone who happened to rent an apartment in the same building. This was our Rebbetzin. She would not miss an opportunity to bring joy to another person.

A Childhood Friend

When I became a *kallah*, naturally my *chassan* and I went to the Rebbetzin to inform her of our engagement. My husband is not from a Lubavitcher family and did not have many relatives in New York. The Rebbetzin asked about my *chassan's* family, but I told her, "You wouldn't know them; he's not from a Lubavitcher family."

The Rebbetzin put my *chassan* at ease and he soon opened up and started to talk about his family. As soon as he said the name of his grandmother, Rebbetzin Rochel Raizel Friedman of Odessa, the Rebbetzin became very excited. It turned out that his grandmother and the Rebbetzin were close friends as girls in Russia. "Did she survive the war?" the Rebbetzin asked. Indeed, she had survived, and was about to leave Russia that month.

The Rebbetzin was happy to learn that her friend was alive and her grandson was in New York. She felt responsible for him, that he shouldn't be lonesome. My brother got married around the same time and he and my husband were in *kollel* together. The Rebbetzin used to stand outside her building, greet people and speak to them. The Rebbetzin noticed that my husband and brother got along well and used to walk

to *kollel* together, chatting together on the way. The Rebbetzin called my mother to say how happy it made her that they were close, because not always do brothers-in-law see eye to eye. She wanted my husband to feel comfortable in his new family.

A Mother to All

Many now-older women remember Rebbetzin Chana giving them motherly advice, when they were young, about how to take care of children. She had such wonderful, down-to-earth ideas. She really cared about all the children of the neighborhood and encouraged their parents to take good care of them, and feed them very well (this was the post-Holocaust era). She loved to see healthy, rosy-cheeked children running about the neighborhood. Most of these children were not Lubavitchers, just part of the neighborhood.

The Rebbe would visit the Rebbetzin every single day. The Rebbe had a key to his mother's apartment. The kitchen was to the right of the entrance. The Rebbe would come in and go into the kitchen to check if his mother had visitors. The Rebbe was happy that his mother was friendly with women in the community and would not disturb her if she was entertaining guests. One woman told me that the Rebbe once walked in while she was visiting the Rebbetzin. She was so embarrassed because they were talking about all sorts of mundane subjects, but the Rebbe sat, waiting, and would not disturb his mother.

With privilege comes responsibility. I have shared with you some of my memories of the time I spent with Rebbetzin Chana. I am passing that privilege along to you. Now it's up to you to take to heart the inspiration of Rebbetzin Chana. Support the *mosdos* that bear her name. Live up to her standards of refinement, *tznius* and kindness. Strengthen your fulfillment of the three *mitzvos* of a woman, which spell out the acronym Chana—*Challah*, *Niddah* and *Hadlakas Neiros*, and encourage others to do the same. ■

This article is based on a speech given by Mrs. Esther Sternberg to the women of Machon Chana on Rebbetzin Chana's *yahrzeit*, Vov Tishrei 5776.