



This article is based on a talk given by Esther Sternberg at the N'shei Chabad Vov Tishrei function in Crown Heights one year ago, at Rebbetzin Chana's 50th *yahrzeit*. It was transcribed from the tape and edited by Chaya Shuchat.

# I Want You to Be Jealous

Many women remember that after Rebbetzin Chana was *niftar* in 1964, the Rebbe pointed out that her name is an acronym of the three *mitzvos* of the woman: Challah, which also includes all aspects of food preparation and keeping a kosher home; *niddah*, the *inyanim* of *taharas hamishpachah*, *shalom bayis* and *tznius*; and *hadlakas neiros*, lighting candles and keeping Shabbos. ¶ The Rebbe asked us, N'shei u'Bnos Chabad, to honor his mother's memory by improving in our fulfillment of these *mitzvos* and helping other women to keep these *mitzvos*. ¶ In honor of Vov Tishrei, I would like to share three stories that I personally experienced, connected with each of these three *mitzvos*.

## CHALLAH: PROOF OF JEWISHNESS

Many years ago, the Rebbe spoke about the Russian immigrants who had just come to America, and how wonderful it would be if every Chabad family would "adopt" a Russian family. As the Rebbe asked, I adopted a certain family, as well as a sweet girl named Marina. I put tremendous *kochos* into her. I invited her into my home, taught her, took her shopping—Marina was a very big part of my life.

At the back of my mind, though, I had a worry. How could I be certain Marina was Jewish? Many Russians felt that having a Jewish father was enough to be considered Jewish. I didn't want to investigate too deeply, so it remained just a niggling doubt.

One Friday afternoon, I invited her to come over while I was baking challah. She came when I was about to be *mafrish challah*. I explained to her what I was doing, and a look of recognition spread over her face. "My babushka used to do this! She used to take a piece of the dough and burn it!"

"Which grandmother?" I asked her.

"It was my mother's mother, and her mother used to do it too!"

I was so happy, because now I had proof that Marina was a Jewish girl.

## NIDDAH: A HASHGACHAH PRATIS STORY

I used to stand by the Rebbe on Sunday when the Rebbe gave out dollars to the women. During the summer these Sunday afternoons ran very late, because the Rebbe would give dollars until *minchah*. So on summer Sundays we would go home very tired.

One Sunday after dollars, I received a phone call. Somebody had found my number in the *neshek* brochure. Often people who were looking for information on Judaism would come across a *neshek* brochure and call with all sorts of questions, not necessarily related to *mitvza neshek*.

A very nervous voice said, "Is this Lubavitch?"

"Yes, how can I help you?"

The woman said breathlessly, "I need help. I have to go to *mikvah* tonight for the first time in my life and the *mikvah*

is closed and I don't know what to do."

"Don't worry, I'll find you a *mikvah*," I said. "First of all, where do you live?"

"Canarsie."

"I know there is a *mikvah* in Canarsie; I don't know why it would be closed. Maybe you dialed the wrong number. But don't worry, I will take you to a *mikvah*. Do you know where Eastern Parkway is?"

"Oh, yes! I was by the Rebbe today to get a dollar."

"Well, the *mikvah* is only a block away."

"But I can't go there! I don't know anyone! I can't go myself."

"If I took you, would that help?"

"Oh, would you do that?" The woman's voice sounded relieved and grateful.

So we made up to meet outside the *mikvah*. Her name was Mrs. Chana Meir, and I took her inside and introduced her to Mrs. Bracha Levertov, *mikvah* lady par excellence. I explained to Mrs. Levertov that Chana was going to the *mikvah* for the first time, and I waited for her in the waiting room.

When Chana came out she told me, "I felt the heavens open up. Thank you so much."

I thought that was the end of the story.

The next day she called me back.

"I want to thank you again. I couldn't sleep all night, thinking how wonderful it was. It reminded me of what I learned about the *Imahot*."

When she spoke I noticed that she had a Hebrew accent. She told me that she was from Israel but had lived in the United States for 30 years and knew very little about Judaism.

Her story began when she came across an ad in an Israeli newspaper that said, "If you are looking for a blessing, write to the Lubavitcher Rebbe." The ad was placed by an organization called Va'adah L'dovrei Ivrit, a Chabad organization in Queens for Hebrew-speaking Jews. Chana sat down and wrote a letter to the Rebbe, saying that she had been married for 18 years with no children. Instead of sending it to 770, she sent it to the address of the Vaada L'Dovrei Ivrit in Queens.

They received the letter, opened it, and realized it was a letter to the Rebbe. So they mailed it to 770 Eastern Parkway. The Rebbe read it and wrote an answer—that she should be careful with the *mitzvah* of *taharas hamishpachah* and she would be blessed with a child. Chana wrote that she was from Canarsie but had not written her return address on the envelope, so the letter was sent back to Vaadah L'dovrei Ivrit (VLI) in Queens.

When VLI received the letter from the Rebbe, they first called the Beis Chabad in Canarsie, but they did not know who she was, as she had never been to the Chabad House. Their next step was to dial information and they were able to find Chana's number.

They called her up and asked, "Did you write a letter to

the Rebbe?"

"Yes, I did, a few weeks ago."

"Well, the Rebbe answered your letter. He says that if you keep *taharas hamishpachah* carefully you will be blessed with a child."

"I will do anything to have a child."

The VLI sent a young couple to the Meirs to teach them the laws of *taharas hamishpachah*. This couple happened to be a nephew and niece of mine, Mendy and Esther Gurary, who have since moved to Belgium. After two months, Chana Meir was ready to go to the *mikvah*. Her *mikvah* night fell on Sunday, and in the afternoon she went to get a dollar from the Rebbe.

As we were speaking I told her, "It is wonderful that you are keeping the *mitzvah* of *taharas hamishpachah* to merit having a child. But what about after the child is born? Surely you want the child to grow up in a good Jewish home, with Shabbos and *kashrus*..."

Again, Chana said, "I am willing to do anything to have a child."

I started teaching her about *kashrus* over the phone, while my niece and nephew taught them the laws of *Shabbos*.

A few months go by, it is the first night of Chanukah and I'm in the kitchen frying latkes. The phone rings and my children tell me that Chana Meir is on the line.

"I can't leave my *latkes*! Tell her I'll call her back."

My children tell me it's an important call and it will only take a minute. So I close all the fires on the stove and take Chana's call.

"Esther, I just wanted to give you a Chanukah present. I'm expecting a baby!"

I was so excited by this news that I forgot all about the *latkes*! (Good thing I remembered to turn off the fires first.)

Nine months after going to the *mikvah*, Chana gave birth to a little girl, Rivka. Two weeks later, my niece Esther Gurary, who had learned *taharas hamishpachah* with her, had a baby boy, and Chana came to the *bris*. We developed a close relationship, but then Chana and her family moved away to Afula, Israel, and we lost touch. We had no contact for the next 12 years. In the interim they became close to the Shluchim in Afula and became a full-fledged Lubavitch family. But we knew nothing of this.

Unfortunately, when Rivka Meir was 15 years old her mother, Chana, suddenly passed away. I knew that Rivka had grown into a fine *frum* young lady but we had no contact.

This past winter, N'shei Chabad in Israel invited me to speak at the "Shabbat laRabbanit," a *kinus* they hold on Shabbos in a hotel in honor of Chof Beis Shvat. I was asked to speak about the Rebbetzin on Friday night.

Before I left for Israel, I received an email from the organizer of the *kinus* telling me that Rivka, the daughter of Chana Meir, had married a *frum* young man. They would like to invite her to the *kinus* and I would close the circle by

# Rivka and I were both so emotional that we had to go off stage and leave the room.

telling the story of how she was born through a miracle of the Rebbe. But they wanted it to be a surprise, so they were not going to introduce us until it was time to tell the story on Shabbos afternoon. I would have to control myself until then.

On Friday night I spoke about the Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka for four hours. All that time I was looking around, trying to figure out who might be the daughter of Chana Meir, but there were 450 ladies there!

On Shabbos afternoon the organizers announced that I was going to speak again. Women came running, thinking they were going to hear more stories of the Rebbetzin. Instead I told them the story of Chana Meir, a woman who knew nothing about *Yiddishkeit* but wanted a child so badly. Thanks to the *brachah* of the Rebbe and her commitment to the *mitzvah* of *taharas hamishpachah*, her child was born. When I finished telling the story I said, "Although I was close to her mother, I never met the girl who was born through the Rebbe's *brachah*. I am about to meet her for the first time."

A sweet young woman, dressed *tzniusdik*, with her hair covered, comes up to the stage with tears streaming down her face. The audience was overcome, there was not a dry eye in the room.

Rivka and I were both so emotional that we had to go off stage and leave the room.

I took her to my room after Shabbos and gave her a dollar from the Rebbe as a present. Her husband came as well and wondered if I could give him a dollar too. My husband was coming to Israel later that week, and he met Rivka's husband and gave him a dollar. Rivka's husband said they had

been married for a year and a half and had not yet been blessed with a child. My husband told Rivka's husband, "I hope this dollar will bring the *brachah* of a child, just like the Rebbe's *brachah* to your mother-in-law."

Nine months after receiving the dollar, Rivka gave birth to a baby.

## HADLAKAS NEIROS: THE POWER OF AN ESSAY

Thirty-six years ago I was lying in bed with temporary paralysis. I was feeling very low, and I thought, I have to do something for *mitzva neshkeh* in order to get well. Two years before that, the Rebbe had told me to publish a book of essays written by girls about the *mitzvah* of lighting Shabbos candles. He told me to make a contest to get the girls to write, and offer prizes to the winners.

So as I was lying in bed I wrote to the Rebbe, saying that maybe we should make another contest. Again we publicized it and offered prizes to the girls who wrote the winning essays. It generated a lot of excitement, we selected the winners, and I thought that was the end of it. I had no thoughts of publishing another book,

because this time I had initiated the idea of a contest just as a *zchus* for myself!

By summer time I was feeling better, *B"H*, and was able to walk up Kingston myself with a walker. I was very lucky. I happened to be in the hardware store and I called home to check up on my baby at home.

My husband answered the phone and said to me, "We just got a call from the Rebbe's office. The Rebbe wants to know, where is the second book? *Al kol ponim*, it must be distributed before Rosh Hashanah!"

It was then exactly 34 days before Rosh Hashanah. How would we put out a book in less than five weeks?

I came home and reviewed the last batch of compositions from our last essay contest, and realized that we didn't have enough interesting material to fill a whole book. But I had an idea. I called Rebbetzin Yehudis Metzger, who was then in charge of the *ruchnius* in Camp Emunah. At the time there were many new immigrants from Russia and Iran attending Camp Emunah.

I called her and explained the Rebbe's request. I asked if she could get the girls to write compositions on *neiros Shabbos Kodesh*.

She sent me a bunch of essays, including one from a 12-year-old Russian girl named Laura. She had just come from Russia and wrote that in camp she had learned to keep Shabbos for the first time. She concluded, "I hope that when I come home I will continue to keep Shabbos just like I did in camp."

We printed her essay in Russian and also translated it into English.

We put together the book and it was printed in time for Rosh Hashanah. The Rebbe was happy, and that was the end of the story. Or so we thought.

Thirty years later (three years ago), I received a call from a woman in Philadelphia. She said, "My name is Yanna. This past Shabbos, I was at the Chabad House and I noticed a book called *A Candle of My Own*. I looked through it and saw an essay by a girl named Laura, who wrote about how much she loved Shabbos and how she hopes to continue keeping Shabbos when she gets home.

"I happen to know Laura. Her husband and daughter are becoming closer to Yiddishkeit, and I think Laura is ready as well. I believe that if I show her a copy of the book with her own essay in it, it could change her life."

I had only two books left, and I was reluctant to part with one of them. But if it could possibly change someone's life...

I agreed to give a copy to Yanna.

For three weeks I didn't hear from her and thought maybe it had gone to waste.

Then I received a call.

"Mrs. Sternberg, this is Laura Fisher. I used to be Laura Brovender. I was in Camp Emunah and I wrote that essay. This past Shabbos I was invited to a Shabbaton. There was a large crowd, and there was an easel set up with a cloth covering. I thought maybe it was a painting that would be unveiled during the Shabbaton.

"Suddenly someone got up and said, 'Laura, we have a surprise for you!'

"They took off the cover and on the easel was the book of essays, opened to my composition. I read it and started to cry. It brought me back to my childhood, when I loved Shabbos and wanted to keep it so badly. But my parents made fun of me and wouldn't let me keep Yiddishkeit. I still remember all the *brachos* I learned in camp."

Then her husband got up and showed a *siddur* that his wife had received that summer from her counselor in Camp Emunah. The counselor had written a blessing to Laura. First the ink is strong, then the pen is running out of ink and the letters look faded. Then apparently the counselor gets a new pen and the letters are strong again.

Laura's husband pointed out that this *brachah* is the story of Laura's life. The experience in Camp Emunah was like the bold first ink, and left a strong impression on Laura. Then the letters faded, but now they are coming to life again and Laura has a new inspiration to keep Yiddishkeit.

Everyone at the Shabbaton was very moved, and Laura called to thank me for my foresight in putting together that book.

I told her, "Don't thank me, thank the Rebbe."

She said, "Do you see the vision of the Rebbe? He knew that years later I would need inspiration and I would see this book again one day when I was ready for it. Now I'm ready."

Laura and Yanna came to visit me together with their daughters, and I told them many stories about *neshek* and

about the Rebbe. I was also invited to Philadelphia to speak to the Russian Jewish community there. I formed a close relationship with Yanna and Laura.

One Shabbos I was hosting Yanna and Laura in my home in Crown Heights. We were discussing the story and I said, "It would be so interesting to find out the name of the counselor who taught Laura."

Laura said, "I don't even know how I ended up in Camp Emunah that summer. I had just come from Russia in May, and by June I was already in camp. I had no skirts, only pants, and my counselor found me clothing and made me feel at home."

All we knew about the counselor was that her name was Yona, because that was how she signed her letter in Laura's *siddur*.

Yanna and Laura had to leave back to Philadelphia, leaving me to crack the mystery of Yona.

My first step was to call Judy Metzger. "Judy, I want to pick your brain."

"Um, I'm not sure that's a good idea at my age..."

"No, you will know. Camp Emunah, 1979."

"Oh, of course, that was the year of the candle-lighting essay contest."

"Yes. Now can you tell me, who was Yona?"

"I know exactly who Yona is. She was a friend of my daughter Tova Meizlish who now lives in Mexico. So if you want to know about Yona, call Mexico."

I called Tova and she told me that Yona Hershkowitz was a wonderful Russian woman. Unfortunately, she had passed away tragically in a car accident, leaving behind four little children, including twin girls who were only two years old. Tova told me that Mrs. Shternie Notik of Chicago was close with her.

I called Mrs. Notik, and learned that my son had arranged a *shidduch* for his friend with a friend of his *kallah*, the daughter of Yona. I realized then that Yona was the mother of my daughter-in-law's friend, Mira Hershkowitz.

Yona was only 16 years old that summer when she was Laura's counselor, yet she gave her all to those girls. She taught them everything—Shabbos, *brachos*, *alef beis*.

When Laura found out that Yona had passed away, she said, "I must be more careful in *mitzvos* because of Yona."

Laura and Yanna both sent their daughters to seminary in Eretz Yisroel. They both went to the Ohel together and their families became completely *shomer Shabbos*.

All it takes is one act to inspire a woman, to ignite a spark. Maybe not that week, maybe it will take a few weeks or even a few years or decades. But every *mitzvah* she does will bring her closer and lead to another *mitzvah*.

I want you all to be jealous of Yona. Be jealous of the *zchus* she had and the impact she made during her short life. It's up to all of us to make a commitment in honor of Rebbetzin Chana, to strengthen the three *mitzvos* given to women, bring light to the world and bring Moshiach. ■