





THE MIRACLE SEFER TORAH: CROWN HEIGHTS STEPS UP

CHAYA SHUCHAT

**What we
remember
most are the
ambulances.
The sirens
wailing, day
and night.**

“We were the first neighborhood in Brooklyn to be hit,

and we were hit hard,” says Hatzalah paramedic Yitzchok Rimler. “I became sick with coronavirus myself right before Purim. At the time I thought I just had the flu. *Baruch Hashem* I recovered quickly and my symptoms were not as bad as the cases I would see in the coming weeks.

“The whole period felt like one very long, difficult day, answering 20 to 30 calls per day. We never knew what tomorrow would bring. Never really sleeping at night, just catching a nap when we could and working 24 hours straight. We just kept going as we were trained to do, trying to save as many lives as we could. The support showed to us by the entire community helped us get through the difficult time. I still have people coming up to me and thanking me for helping them.”

Shloimy Greenwald was sick with COVID-19 when a friend sent him a published letter of the Friediker Rebbe. The letter describes a terrible disease that ravaged the town of Mezhibuzh during the time of the Baal Shem Tov. The Baal Shem Tov instructed the community to join together to write a *sefer Torah*, which they did. As the miracle *sefer Torah* was written, the epidemic began to abate.

As Shloimy read the letter (translated below), he realized the eerie parallels between the *mageifah* described in the letter and the current pandemic. As soon as he finished reading, he called two friends, fellow Crown Heights businessmen Zalmy Cohen and Beryl Junik. “Our community is suffering and we need to do



Yitzchok Rimler on duty.

something,” he said. They decided to jointly sponsor a *sefer Torah* on behalf of their community.

The three men first spoke in the afternoon and by that evening the writing of the *sefer Torah* was already underway. “We were going to start the next day, but why wait?” Zalmy explained. “We were already losing people by the dozens and we needed a bigger solution than just masks and gloves. We needed to challenge the virus on a *ruchniusdike* level.”

As word of the project spread, people began calling and texting to ask if they could dedicate a letter for loved ones.

“Other communities were reaching out, asking if they could join,” Shloimy explained, “and we thought, ‘Why limit this to Crown Heights when we could be *mezakeh* all Yidden?’”

Within five weeks, more than 1.7 million people visited the website of the newly formed organization, United for Protection, and more than 300,000 letters were dedicated to people across the globe.

Yossi Majerczyk, 37, was in the hospital with COVID and his condition was worsening. “They took an X-ray of my lungs and said things looked really bad. I was very nervous. A friend of mine sent me a text and asked me if



Yossi Majerczyk sick in the hospital with covid.

Twenty minutes later the doctor came in to tell me that my numbers were improving and things were starting to turn around... That's the power of the *ois*.



Yossi Majerczyk leaving the hospital with oxygen which *b"H* he did not end up using..



Yossi Majerczyk, fully recovered, with his daughters.



Beryl Junik at the writing of the *sefer Torah*.



Zalmy Cohen at the writing of the *sefer Torah*.

I wanted him to buy an *ois* for me and my family in the *sefer Torah*. I said absolutely, please do. Twenty minutes later the doctor came in to tell me that my numbers were improving and things were starting to turn around... That's the power of the *ois*. I had a roommate in the hospital, a *chassidische Yid*, and we got him an *ois* too. He was very happy, and we helped him put on *tefillin* for the first time since he became ill.

"Before I left the hospital, the doctors told me that I had permanent damage to my lungs and that I might need oxygen for the rest of my life. They were sending me home with an oxygen tank and would deliver the equipment to my home. I was devastated and very scared.

"A friend called me a few minutes later and said he was on his way to the Ohel. I told him what the doctor had just said and asked him to *daven* for me. About six hours later, the doctor came in and said that he had checked the X-rays again and they didn't look as bad as he originally thought, and I would probably heal within six months. Then he said that it looked like I was doing better and he took the oxygen mask off my face. I've never needed it since. I called my friend and asked him when he was

at the Ohel, and found out that he had just been there 10 minutes before. I was discharged from the hospital the next day."

The Last-Minute Concert

After the Hatzalah *sefer Torah* was completed, the organizers realized there was still more they could do. They had raised more than enough money from people's donations to cover the cost of the Torah. They originally planned to just give the proceeds straight to Hatzalah, but why leave it at that? They came up with a plan to hold a fully online Lag B'omer fundraising concert for Hatzalah. The catch? It was only ten days before Lag B'omer. "People kept telling us it was too late, too last-minute, and that we had no idea what we were doing," says Zalmy. "People thought we were crazy to try to pull off something so big in just ten days and that it would

The Gedaliah Society in Action

While the coronavirus was pounding Crown Heights, the Gedaliah Society swung into action. The Gedaliah Society is a coalition of more than 250 Chabad healthcare workers, founded by Dr. Shloime Minkowitz in memory of his father-in-law, Reb Gedaliah Shaffer, who inspired many with his love of Hashem, Torah and Chassidus coupled with a deep knowledge and understanding of science.

Their first step was to set up a hotline staffed by healthcare professionals to address the community's most pressing questions. Another branch of the hotline provided errand support and a third offered mental health counseling for those feeling stressed during isolation.



Miriam Andrusier

At its height the hotline was fielding 500 calls per day. When the live hotline ended the Society shifted to email format, and even now emails still come trickling in. "We were answering anything from basic questions like how to disinfect the bathroom, to complicated questions from parents of medically fragile children with nurses and aides coming and going," says Miriam Andrusier, the hotline coordinator. "We were able to quickly identify the people most at risk and urge them to call Hatzalah, which in many cases saved lives.

"Although the hotline was intended to serve the Crown Heights community, we ended up getting calls from all over the world. It



Reb Gedaliah Shaffer, a"h

turned out that we were ahead of the curve. Because we were one of the first communities in the U.S. to be hard hit, we were researching and providing information on symptoms, isolation and social distancing when few guidelines were available from the Department of Health or the CDC."

Because many people couldn't leave their homes at all, there was great need for assistance to get food, medications, thermometers and supplies. Irit Lang, who managed the errand arm of the hotline, says, "I thought it would be a challenge to recruit enough volunteers to carry out the errands, but we were blown away by how many people responded to our call for young, healthy volunteers. Before long we had a WhatsApp group with dozens of people. Every time an errand request came in either to the hotline or by email, the request was posted to the group—taking care to hide any identifying or private information—and it was usually quickly grabbed up by one of the volunteers. Overall we completed about 500 to 600 errands.

"Right before Pesach, there were many requests for help with Pesach shopping, as many people needed help making Pesach themselves for the first time on such short notice. The problem was that there were

extremely long lines outside many of the stores in Crown Heights, with wait times sometimes approaching an hour or more. It was hard to ask our volunteers to wait in line an hour or more to pick up a few items. Our solution was to post signs on the walls along the long lines of people waiting, asking them to text our number if they were willing to pick up a few items for the Gedaliah Society errand program. We then matched the shopper with the appropriate errand request.

"...One Friday afternoon we had two volunteers driving to multiple pharmacies near Crown Heights to find thermometers and Tylenol for those who needed it. These items were sold out in most stores and difficult to find. They came back to Crown Heights after the first siren and still managed to drop off necessary supplies to those who needed it.

"We worked closely with Hatzalah daily, often asking them to check on people who had called us on our COVID Hotline. On Chol Hamoed Pesach, I got a call from Hatzalah saying they had just been on a call in a home with small children where both parents were really sick and asking for help. I set out to help that family with Yom Tov food as well as regular food for Chol Hamoed. A friend of mine lived on their block, and I asked her to post on her block WhatsApp group asking if anyone could help with food for this family in need. The food kept coming and I was astonished by the *chessed* I saw that day, with all the neighbors coming to the rescue." ❧



Irit Lang



Shloimy Greenwald at the concert.

just flop, but we were persistent, and with endorsement from Central Hatzalah, things began to fall into place.”

Big-name singers like Avraham Fried and Lipa Schmeltzer signed on. Soon there was a full roster of singers for a 24-hour Hatzalah-thon. Initially the plan was to fundraise for all New York City chapters of Hatzalah, but the event grew and grew until 47 Hatzalah chapters from around the world joined in.

The project was enormously successful. Usually an event on that scale would take six months to a year to plan. Here, three people working day and night pulled it off in less than two weeks. There were more than three million hits on the concert webpage. In total, they raised a whopping \$15 million for Hatzalah.

“This event brought many different types of Jews together,” says Shloimy Greenwald. “In addition to all the money we raised for Hatzalah, this project also brought tremendous unity to Klal Yisroel like we haven’t

seen in many years.”

With all letters in the first *sefer Torah* completely sold out, the organizers realized there was still a huge demand to dedicate more letters. At the Hatzalah-thon, a second *sefer Torah* was initiated and those letters were quickly dedicated as well. Now we wait to see what the trio will come up with to celebrate the *siyum* of these miracle Torahs.

“Through the Torah and the message of *achdus*, all the fences are coming down,” says Beryl Junik. “We’re standing together and crying out, ‘*Barcheinu Avinu kulanu k’echad!*’ We’re standing before our Father and telling Him that all His children are standing together. Now, please open the doors and let us in...” ❧

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How the Besht Shul Was Repaired

The story of the Baal Shem Tov's miracle Torah was recorded by the Friediker Rebbe and published in Igros Kodesh of the Rebbe Rayatz, Vol. 6, p. 280.

On Tuesday, 21 Marcheshvan 5658 (1898), my father [the Rebbe Rashab] took a trip to visit the gravesites of *tzadikim* in Mezhibuzh, Postov, Anipoli, Berdichev, Haditch and Niezhin. Along the way he called meetings for communal needs in Kiev, Zhitomir and Berditchev.

On Sunday, 26 Marcheshvan, my father came to Mezhibuzh at noon, together with the *chossid* Rabbi Binyamin Berlin. Although he had already *davened*, the first thing he did was to visit the shul of the Baal Shem Tov. Reb Binyamin went first to the bathhouse to see if there was a kosher *mikvah*, because he knew

that the Rebbe wanted to visit the gravesite of the Baal Shem Tov that evening before traveling on.

When the Rebbe entered the shul of the Baal Shem Tov, most of the congregants had already gone home. There was one old man, the *shamash*, Reb Tuvia Leib, still sitting wrapped in his *tallis* and *tefillin*. A few others were standing around him and he was telling them a story of the Baal Shem Tov that he had heard from his father and grandfather. Reb Tuvia Leib was then at an advanced age and could no longer serve as *shamash* even for light work, but because he constantly sat in shul *davening* and learning, and because his family had always served the Baal Shem Tov, the congregation honored him with the title of *shamash* in the Baal Shem Tov's shul. (His great-grandfather, Reb Yosef Tzvi, had served in the home of the Baal Shem Tov during his last ten years of life, and the Baal Shem Tov had blessed him up to the third generation with long life.)

At the time, the shul of the Baal Shem Tov was in great need of repairs, which the congregants—most of whom were poor and old—could not

afford, and the community members who could afford it did not take it much to heart. The elders who were aware of this, primarily Reb Tuvia Leib, were very distressed by this because it was a town tradition that as long as the shul was kept in good repair there would be peace in the village, and if it would fall, *chas v'shalom*, the whole town would be destroyed. The elders and Reb Tuvia Leib consulted with each other and decided that from time to time they would take out "the miracle *sefer Torah*" and with the donations of the people who would receive an *aliyah*, they'd be able to make the necessary repairs.

When the Rebbe entered the shul, Reb Tuvia Leib was speaking about the holiness of that *sefer Torah*, and how many of the *tzadikim* of the previous generation would come to Mezhibuzh just to have an *aliyah* on that Torah and to kiss the cloth of the Baal Shem Tov's *bimah*. Never, wept Reb Tuvia Leib, did they ever sell this holiness for silver and gold. For many years, nobody dared to take this *sefer Torah* out of the *aron kodesh* except on Hoshanah Rabbah, Shmini Atzeres and Simchas Torah for *hakafos*. And now to raise money they would take out the Torah and

honor the wealthy people with *aliyos*. At this thought, he broke down and cried and cried.

In the meantime, Reb Binyamin Berlin came to shul and told the Rebbe that the bathhouse had a kosher *mikvah*, and they had also arranged a wagon to take them to the cemetery.

The Rebbe asked Reb Tuvia Leib the *shamash* to tell the story of the miracle *sefer Torah*. This is what he said:

In 5512 (1752) there was, *lo aleinu*, a terrible decree on Mezhibuzh, and many men, women, and children became sick, some of them deathly ill. There was a great outcry in the city because there was not a single family that didn't have at least one or two who were suffering.

They came to the Baal Shem Tov and cried for all the sick, and pleaded with him to *daven* for them.

The Baal Shem Tov answered that he could not save them; only the community could save the sick and weaken or nullify the decree. In Shmoneh Esrei we say, "*U'sehi l'ratzon tamid avodas Yisroel amecha.*" May the service of Your people, Israel, always find favor. The meaning is that the service of Israel Your people always evokes G-d's

will to weaken the decree and nullify it. What is our service that always stands before Hashem? This refers to the letters of Torah, either through saying the words of Torah and *Tehillim*, or through writing a *sefer Torah* that everyone will participate in.

At that moment they all decided as one to write a *sefer Torah*, and all committed to contribute to it. The Baal Shem Tov told his *sofer*, the *tzadik* Reb Tzvi, that he should write two sections, and right away the sick began to heal. The Torah was thus called "the miracle *sefer Torah*."

The Rebbe Rashab *davened minchah* and hurried to the bathhouse and from there to the cemetery to the *tziun* of the Baal Shem Tov and was there until a late hour. He returned to the shul of the Baal Shem Tov to *daven maariv*, while still fasting. He told Reb Binyamin Berlin to check with Reb Tuvia Leib and the other elders how much it would cost to repair the shul. They answered that a basic repair would cost 300 rubles, but that a full, solid renovation would cost 450 rubles.

The Rebbe told Reb Binyamin Berliner to tell them that he (the Rebbe) was a businessman from Orsha in the Mohilev district (because the Rebbe used to pay a fee

for a certificate stating that he belonged to a merchants' guild) and that he was prepared to pay the entire sum for a complete renovation. His condition was that the next morning, Monday, they would hold a *minyan* and read the *parshah* from the miracle *sefer Torah*, and he would be honored with an *aliyah* and with *gelilah*. His terms were: 1) the *minyan* would be held at dawn; 2) only the elders would participate in the *minyan*; 3) a *kohen* and *levi* would be called for an *aliyah*; 4) for the next three days, nobody else should be informed of this.

When they agreed to all his conditions, the Rebbe gave them 200 rubles as a down payment, and Reb Binyamin wrote up a contract.

The Rebbe went back to his inn and drank a cup of tea and ate some bread. He went back to the shul and honored Reb Tuvia Leib and the elders [with refreshments] and sat with them until deep in the night. Then he went back to the inn to rest. He woke up while it was still night and went to *toivel*, and met some of the elders. They went together to the shul of the Baal Shem Tov and prepared for *davening*. After *shacharis* the Rebbe went back to the *tziun* of the Baal Shem Tov and from there he went straight to the train station. ❧