

FIVE-DOLLAR BILL IN SIBERIA

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THE FIVE-DOLLAR BILL

Shalom again! Remember me? Lazer? I used to drive a school bus in Crown Heights, and then moved to Israel. I've been putting on *tefillin* with people for years now, and experienced many stories of *hashgachah pratit* while doing so. Several of my true stories about *mitvza tefillin*, the Rebbe's campaign to spread the *mitzvah* of *tefillin* for Jewish men, have been published in this magazine. You can read them now at nsheichabadnewsletter.com/archives/Raksin.

Let me rewind a little for this story. Two years ago, in 2019, we traveled to Novokuznetsk, Russia, for Succos. Novokuznetsk is a remote city in Siberia, where our relatives, the Rabinovitzes, recently moved on *shlichus*. The closest *shliach* is a five-hour car ride away. The *shliach*, not having seen family in a while, was eager for us to come for Yom Tov, and we were excited to see first-hand what their *shlichus* was all about.

Yom Tov was beautiful. Part of it was cold and snowy, but the *shlichus* kept us warm.

In shul on Shemini Atzeres, there was much excitement for *hakafos*. It was the first time the community had a *shliach* to make real *lebedike hakafos*. At the beginning of the *hakafos*, a man walked in, a Jew from Moscow who comes to Novokuznetsk often for business. He came to *daven* and to participate in *hakafos*. He spoke English, so after *hakafos*, we started talking. As we were talking, I noticed something was up with him. After a minute, I realized what it was: he was very tipsy. During the conversation he shared that he

used to be wealthy, but had fallen heavily into debt. By some miracle, he had gotten out of debt, and, thank G-d, made money again. He also disclosed that he had a drinking problem.

I saw this man needed a little eye-opener. I explained to him that even though he had recovered from a downfall once, there was no guarantee that he would be that lucky again.

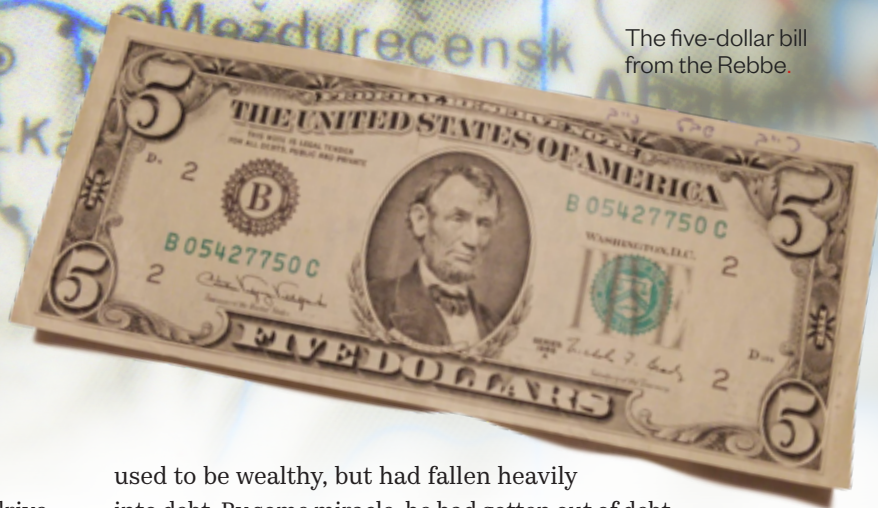
"Drinking destroys you," I said. "First, you lag behind in work, miss flights, and then appointments; this causes you to lose your business. Then, your friends leave, and eventually you ruin relationships with your family. Is that what you want in life?"

The man teared up; the truth really hit him. "If you become sober," I continued, "you will have everything."

I had an idea, so I continued, "Let's make a deal. I have a rare five-dollar bill from the Rebbe, which I got on Chof Beis Shvat 5752 [date of the Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka's *yahrzeit* in 1992]. I will give you this bill if you fulfill two conditions. The first requirement is, you promise never to drink alcohol again, not even a small *l'chaim*. Second, you build a women's *mikvah* in the city. The city, as of now, has no *mikvah*. If you do these, the Rebbe dollar is yours." (Currently, Mrs. Rabinovitz must travel five hours each way by train in the snow to use a *mikvah*.)

The man was all emotional. In a choking voice he said to me, "Lazer, today is my birthday. This morning I turned to a picture of the Rebbe in my room, and cried out, 'Rebbe, Rebbe, I need your help! I know I have a drinking problem and I need you to help me stop drinking.' Now, here you

The five-dollar bill from the Rebbe.



are, offering me a five-dollar bill from the Rebbe!”

I had tears in my eyes too. We shook hands on the deal. I told him the five-dollar bill was in Israel where we live, and when I would verify that he is keeping his part of the deal, I'd send him the bill.

A few weeks passed, and I sent him a text asking how it was going with our deal. I received no response. I waited a few more months and tried again, but there was still no answer. I reached out to the *shliach* to see what was happening. He told me the man was not answering because he wasn't keeping his part of the bargain.

After hearing this, I messaged the man that if by Shavuos he hadn't done his part of the deal, then it would be off. Shavuos came and went, and I heard nothing from him. It looked like our deal was off.

Succos came again, but we couldn't travel to Russia due to COVID. Not long after, I got a call from the *shliach*: “This Yid is desperately looking for you. He said he needs to speak to you.”

We spoke, and he said, “Listen, I need the five-dollar bill urgently! You see, my wife had a dream. In her dream, she saw a rabbi with a white beard, we presume it's the Rebbe, coming to me and questioning, ‘Where is the dollar?’ My wife thought nothing of it, and dismissed it as just a dream. But then she had the dream two more times and decided to take it seriously. My wife asked me why I hadn't gotten the dollar already,

because we were already looking into buying a building for the *shul* and *mikvah*. She knew about the deal, but only about the building a *mikvah* part. She didn't know about the second part, to stop drinking.

“That's why I am calling you now. I need the dollar because now I've kept both parts of my side of the deal. You see, it's over half a year already that I haven't touched alcohol.”

Excitedly, I called the *shliach*, and he confirmed that, yes, this man had stopped drinking alcohol completely. Even *kiddush* he makes on grape juice. In addition, he was making serious inquiries into buying a building for the *shul* and *mikvah*.

Baruch Hashem, everything was working out!

The next course of action was to figure out how to transfer the Rebbe's \$5 bill to him. Traveling to Russia was not an option because the borders were closed to non-citizens. Also, we planned to be in America for a few months to attend a few family *simchas*. How would we get the bill to him safely?

If it's meant to be, Hashem has His ways. Our son-in-law was flying in from Israel to be at a family *simchah*, so we asked him travel to Afula,

where we live, and pick up the bill to bring to New York. The *shliach* from Novokuznetsk was also traveling in to NY for the same wedding. We made a *shidduch* between the two. We took the five-dollar bill to 770 and passed it on to the *shliach* to take to Novokuznetsk and give to the guy.

In Russia, the community made a big deal over the receiving of the dollar. The man's family members were all present when he received the Rebbe bill. It was an emotional event, with the story coming full circle.

Hot-off-the-press update exclusively for NCN readers: The man kept to the deal, even after getting the dollar. He bought the building he was looking into, and is planning to build a *shul* and women's *mikvah* very soon, *iy"H*. The community also just had its first, and absolutely beautiful, *hachnasas sefer Torah*.

The Rebbe's *shluchim*, even those who live in remote, far-flung places such as Siberia, work hard to spread *Yiddishkeit*. My wife and I are honored that we had the *zchus* to play a role in this special *shlichus*.

TEFILLIN NO, GUESTS YES

To visit family, my wife and I spent some time in Bal Harbour, Florida.



Chanukah program in Novokuznetsk. The *shliach*, Rabbi Menachem Rabinovitz, is on the far right. His wife, the *shlucha* Mrs. Chaya Pearl Rabinovitz, is second from the left.

Friday night, we ate the *seudah* at the home of our niece. We met an interesting gentleman and his wife who were also guests at the meal. The man introduced himself and we started talking. He came from a *frum* background, then went a little south. No beard, no *peyos*, and it was only out of respect for the host that he was wearing a *yamulke*. It was definitely interesting, and at the same time a pleasure, to speak with him in a perfect, *heimishe* Yiddish!

After the guests left, my nephew turned to me and said, “Lazer, it’s your job to get that guy to put on *tefillin*.”

Sunday, I tried talking to the guy, but got nowhere. I’ve had many hard nuts to crack in my years of putting on *tefillin* with people, but I saw this would be different. Convincing through words wouldn’t help, and I’d have to find the right opportunity. But I knew my mission was to get this Yid to put on *tefillin*, by hook or by crook, and I don’t give up.

Not long after, one Shabbos after *davening*, my wife and I were standing outside the shul in Bal Harbour. The man came out too and, seeing us standing there, he came over to talk to us. He often comes to *shul* towards the end of *davening* just to socialize. He asked us if we would like to come to his house for a Shabbos meal. His wife is very *frum* and keeps a *glatt-kosher* kitchen, he said. Though he doesn’t stick to that standard out of the house, he’s not opposed to it in his house.

We tried to give excuses as to why we couldn’t make it, but he was very persistent. He is very big on the *mitzvah* of *hachnasas orchim*, and refused to take no for an answer. He really wanted us at a future Shabbos meal in his home (not that day, when we already had plans).

The next day, my wife told me,

“Lazer, if he can be so persistent in the *mitzvah* of *hachnasas orchim*, you can be just as persistent in *mitvza tefillin*.”

I realized she was right, so I called him that very evening. I told him, “Just like it makes you feel good for us to come to your house for a Shabbos meal, it makes me feel good if you put on *tefillin*.”

Then I handed him an ultimatum: “If you put on *tefillin*, we will come to your meal.”

I called him again the next day to tell him I was coming over to put on *tefillin* with him. He told me he wasn’t home for the day. Of course, that didn’t stop me. I called again the next day. The man gave a similar excuse. On Wednesday, I reminded him that he had until Friday to put on *tefillin* if he wanted us to come to him for *seudas Shabbos*.

Something cracked. “Do you need to put it on with me,” he asked, “or could I just put on *tefillin* myself?”

“As long as you put on *tefillin*, that’s fine,” I answered.

The phone was quiet for a few minutes. The man then said, “Look, here’s the deal. Tomorrow, Thursday, the Rabbi’s granddaughter from Bal Harbour is getting engaged in New York. A group of us community members are flying from Florida to New York to be at the Ohel for the engagement. I’m sure when I’ll be at the Ohel, a Lubavitcher will offer me *tefillin*. I’ll

accept the offer and do it there.”

“Wait a second,” I answered. “You’ll be walking in with a *yamulke*. Why would anyone think you didn’t put on *tefillin*?”

“Then I’ll go over and ask someone for *tefillin*,” he said.

Sure enough, he flew to New York the next day. At the Ohel, he raised his voice and called out, “Hey, does anyone have a pair of *tefillin* for me to put on?” One man came over and lent him *tefillin*.

He told him, “There’s this crazy guy who won’t come to me for Shabbos if I don’t put on *tefillin*. That’s why I’m doing this. He also insists I get it on camera, or he won’t believe me.” Out came the phones, recording the occasion of this man, who had always refused *tefillin*, now putting on *tefillin*.

Hachnasas orchim was so important to him, that he was willing to do something he was against, just in order to do that *mitzvah* which meant so much to him. *Mitzvah goreres mitzvah*, and we were guests at his house for Shabbos. Now that’s a happy ending, or rather, beginning... ❀

Lazer Raksin with the Rebbe (19 Tishrei 5739).

