

WHAT I LEARNED

at age 14

ESTHER STERNBERG

WITH PRIVILEGE COMES RESPONSIBILITY

I'VE TOLD THIS one before in these pages, but I have to tell it again: Forty-seven years ago, the Rebbe launched the *neshek* campaign to encourage women and girls to light Shabbos candles. When *mitvza neshek* started, all N'shei Chabad activities were covered by the Rebbe's office. I just assumed that *mitvza neshek* would also be covered that way.

When we printed our first candle-lighting brochure, the various expenses for the designer, printer, photographer, etc., came out to \$4,000, a very large sum of money in those days. I submitted the bill to the Rebbe's office and expected a check within a few days.

When the check didn't arrive, I called Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Isaac Hodakov, the Rebbe's secretary, and he told me that he needed to speak to me in person.

When I arrived in his office, Rabbi Hodakov said to me, "Do you know what a great *zchus* you have to start a new *moisad* that is giving the Rebbe so much *nachas*?"

This was strange, as it was not

Rabbi Hodakov's style to give compliments. But this time, he really laid it on thick, telling me how privileged and lucky I was to have been given this *zchus*. By now I knew something was up.

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

Gulp.

I somehow managed to raise the money for *mitvza neshek*, that time and ever since. And I took from him a lesson for life—that with great *zchus* comes great *achrayus*.

Because I merited to know the Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka (1901-1988) and spend time with her while many others did not, I feel that with this *zchus* comes the responsibility to share what I have experienced with others.

I share with trepidation.

The Rebbetzin was a very private person who did not want *kavod* or recognition of any type. She had no desire to be treated like the royalty she was.

The reason I got to know her was not because of me, but due to my father, Rabbi Shneur Zalman Gurary, whose family was close with the Rebbeim going back seven generations. The Rebbetzin remembered my father as a toddler. The Rebbetzin's sister was married to my father's first cousin.



It's no wonder, then, that the Rebbetzin had a very clear understanding of her role in this world, which permeated everything she did. She was a helpmate and soulmate of the Rebbe, allowing and enabling him to do all he did for Klal Yisroel to prepare the world for Moshiach.

We felt almost related.

My father used to talk to the Rebbetzin about me, his only daughter. He shared with her his worries and his *nachas*. As my father's daughter I was naturally drawn into that relationship.

NESHAMAH NAME

WHEN REBBETZIN CHAYA Mushka passed away, the Rebbe asked everyone to establish new institutions in her memory: schools, *mikvaos*, etc. One of those organizations was Keren Chomesh, an interest-free

loan called by an acronym of the Rebbetzin's initials. Usually when one of the Rebbeim is called by an acronym (Rayatz, Rashab, etc.) we use the first names only, not the last name. But the Rebbe explained that he allowed the name Chomesh to be used, with the *shin* of Schneerson, because Schneerson is a *neshamah* name, denoting that the Rebbetzin is a direct descendant of the Alter Rebbe.

It's no wonder, then, that the Rebbetzin had a very clear understanding of her role in this world, which permeated everything she did. She was a helpmate and soulmate

of the Rebbe, allowing and enabling him to do all he did for Klal Yisroel to prepare the world for Moshiach.

OIB AZOY...

I MET THE Rebbetzin for the first time when I was a child. I went with my mother, Mrs. Chava Gourarie, to Manhattan because she had to pay a *shivah* call to a relative. We were coming out of the elevator as the Rebbetzin was coming in. They greeted each other, and later my mother told me, "That was the Rebbetzin."

When I was 14 years old, on Shabbos Shemini Atzeres at 8 a.m., I heard a commotion in my parents' bedroom. A doctor was saying very loudly, obviously upset, "You must go to the hospital right now! Your life is in danger!" My father was saying, "I won't go unless the Rebbe tells me to go!" They were arguing back and forth.

When my father saw me, he said, "Esther, go to the Rebbe's house and ask if I should go to the hospital."

"Me? *Who, me?* I can't go! I never went to the Rebbe's house! Please, no!"

"So find your brother [Rabbi Itche Meir Gurary] and go with him."

After the Rebbe's *hakafos*, the *bachurim* made their own *hakafos* all through the night so I had no way of finding him. I ran all over Crown Heights looking for my brother, and finally found out that he was asleep in one of the dormitories. They woke him up and sent him to me and I told him the situation. He said, "I won't be able to speak. I'm not lucid!" So the two of us went searching for a relative to go with us, and we found one.

But we knew we had no choice. We had to go to the Rebbe's house.

We knocked on the front door. No answer. Back door. No answer.

The third person who was with us said, "For *pikuach nefesh* you can ring

the doorbell." I rang.

Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka came to the door. Obviously we had woken her.

"Rebbetzin, I'm so sorry for waking you up," I said in Yiddish. I quickly told the Rebbetzin that my father has to go to the hospital right away but he won't go unless the Rebbe tells him to.

The Rebbetzin said to me, "Wait here. I'll ask."

She came back downstairs and said, "My husband said to call Dr. Seligson."

I remonstrated, "We already have a doctor, Dr. Marritt, and he said to go to the hospital."

For this I say *Al Chet* every year on Yom Kippur. You don't correct the Rebbe!

The Rebbetzin went upstairs again, came back, and said, "My husband said, 'Oib azoy, [if so,] he can go.'"

Oib azoy... if you think you're smarter.

Oib azoy... if you think the Rebbe didn't know that already.

The Rebbetzin wished my father a *refuah sheleimah*. I thanked her and apologized profusely again.

I ran home and told my mother that the Rebbe had said he should go to the hospital.

My father said, "Tell me *everything* that happened."

I said, "What's the difference? The Rebbe said to go, so go!"

But my father insisted. I told my father word for word what had happened.

My father said, "We have to call Dr. Seligson."

"But—"

My father said, "When the Rebbe tells us something, we don't answer 'but.'"

I learned that at age 14.

Dr. Seligson came and assessed the situation and said that riding in a car on Shabbos is forbidden *m'doraisa*, but riding on Yom Tov is forbidden *m'dirabanan*. Therefore my father

should wait for that night to go to the hospital, when Shabbos would be over but it would still be Yom Tov.

My father was suffering from a large kidney stone, which was causing a life-threatening infection. Before this, my father had had many surgeries for tremendous kidney stones that could not pass on their own.

Because Dr. Seligson said to wait, we waited, and within two hours, the kidney stone passed by itself (albeit very painfully) and he did not have to go to the hospital. The infection also cleared up on its own. This was a clear miracle.

Two days later, Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka called my mother and said, "I'm happy the problem was resolved, but I think your daughter feels bad and will always feel bad thinking she woke me up. Please tell her that she didn't wake me up and I enjoyed seeing how much she has grown up. Please tell her I was so happy to meet her."

Dear readers, I assure you that I woke her up. But she worried that I would feel bad all my life, so she told my mother how happy she was to meet me. She didn't have to care about a 14-year-old girl's feelings, but this was the extent of her *eidelkeit* and sensitivity.

"I DON'T WANT THE REBBE TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PROBLEM AT ALL"

WHEN IT CAME to her own needs she never wanted to bother the Rebbe and take him away from *chassidim*.

One time the Rebbetzin had a problem with her eye. My father consulted with a Dr. Friedman in Manhattan, who referred him to a top ophthalmologist. His earliest appointment was in three months. My father drove down to Manhattan,

walked into this doctor's office and said, "I must speak to him for *ONE MINUTE!*" He would not accept any excuses. *Just one minute!*

The doctor agreed to speak to him, and he said, "This is the most important and greatest woman in all of New York, and you must see her immediately."

The doctor gave the Rebbetzin an appointment for the next day.

My father accompanied the Rebbetzin to the doctor, who gave a diagnosis, offered two treatment options and explained the risks and benefits of both. He offered the Rebbetzin a choice, and concluded, "Come to the hospital tomorrow and let me know which one you want."

On the way home my father said, "So we'll ask the Rebbe which procedure to do."

The Rebbetzin said, "*Chas v'shalom!* I don't want the Rebbe to know about this problem at all."

My father laughed! "But the whole world asks—!"

The Rebbetzin said, "I would never want to worry him."

"So how will we decide?"

"You will decide."

"Me? How will I know?"

The Rebbetzin said, "I trust you to decide."

My father came home and sat and thought, with my mother next to him. For quite a while he sat there, very distressed. Then my father got up and did what he always did when he was about to write a letter to the Rebbe: hat, *gartel*, *negel vasser*. He wrote a letter to the Rebbe describing the situation, ending with, "I don't do a thing without asking the Rebbe." And he sent that letter to the Rebbe.

In response to my father's question, the Rebbe wrote, "My wife does not have to know I am involved," and he chose one procedure which the Rebbetzin underwent successfully.

MISSING X-RAYS AND TOUGH SECURITY GUARDS

IN 1983, ON the eve of Tishah B'Av, the Rebbetzin had a serious fall and broke her hip. She was taken to the Hospital for Joint Diseases, with my father accompanying her. The Rebbe asked my father to arrange for her to have private nurses and a private room.

At midnight my father called me and said, "You need to be here at 6 a.m. to arrange a consultation. Let three doctors, big specialists, meet and decide what to do, and whether the Rebbetzin can handle surgery."

I was then in the beginning of a pregnancy. I had brought my children back with me from the country to Crown Heights because I needed to fast; I figured that in Crown Heights I would have babysitters so I could fast. And it was Tishah B'Av. I said to my husband, "How will I do this while fasting?" My father told me to take along food and break my fast if necessary, in order to do everything for the Rebbetzin.

When I got to the hospital, the Rebbetzin was already

in a private room. I met with the nurses and chose the ones I thought were suitable. Then I waited for the consultation with the doctors. I knew the Rebbetzin was on the seventh floor. I decided to stay nearby in case I was needed.

When I got up to the seventh floor I heard the nurse calling to another nurse with instructions, or a question, and spelling out the name, "S, C, H, N, E, E, R..."

I went over to her and asked, "What's wrong?" The nurse said, "It's unbelievable, but we lost her X-rays! We have to repeat the X-rays, but it will be so painful for her, because after a break it keeps swelling more and more."

I was stunned. Such a renowned hospital and they go and lose her X-rays? I wanted to cry. To subject the Rebbetzin to a painful ordeal because they were *schlimazels*?

Down the hall, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a doctor I had been to three years earlier for my knee. (I didn't actually need to see him then. It was all a big mistake. I think I only

needed to meet him so I would know him and he would help us now.)

I ran up to him and said, "Dr. Springer! You're here like a *malach*."

He turned to me. "I'm a *malach*?"

I said, "The Lubavitcher Rebbetzin is here with a broken hip. Three specialists are coming for a consult but they lost her X-rays. The pain from repeating the X-rays will be

terrible for her. How did they lose them?? *What can be done??*"

Dr. Springer said, "Did they look in the chest of drawers in her room? Sometimes when a patient comes up they put all their belongings into the chest of drawers, with the X-rays too."

I didn't think it was right for me to go into the room with her in that condition, because whenever I saw her she was always fully and beautifully dressed. So I called the nurse and asked her to check the drawers, and sure enough, the X-rays were in the drawer.

The doctors came and the consultation took place and it was decided that the Rebbetzin could not have surgery. They were going to have to find a different way to help her, and manage her pain.

The Rebbe asked my father to stay in the hospital in case other questions would arise. The Rebbe wanted us to rent a room nearby where my father could rest. We took over the visitors' room at the Hospital for Joint Diseases. All day, doctors were coming with ideas for pain management and other treatments.

Tishah B'Av was almost over. There was so much going on; my father was on the phone with the Rebbe from the hospital throughout the day. Someone had gone to the Rebbetzin's house to get her bed jacket, but she couldn't put it on because she would have to lift her arm and that would cause pain in her hip. Someone brought food from Crown Heights for us to break our fast which we did at the right time. The phone in the phone booth rang, and we were informed that the Rebbe was leaving 770 to visit the Rebbetzin. I was excited. I had never seen the Rebbe anywhere but in 770 or in his home or the Ohel.

I went to the Rebbetzin's room, called out the nurse and told her to





▲ Rabbi Shneur Zalman and Mrs. Chava Gourarie, parents of Esther Sternberg (in background), receiving dollars and *brachos* from the Rebbe. JEM Photo ID#98256.

tell the Rebbetzin that her husband was coming to visit. I went back to the visitors' room. Soon after, the nurse came to find me there, with tears in her eyes, and said, "This remarkable woman asked me to help her get dressed and she asked me to go find makeup so she wouldn't look as if she's in pain." The Rebbetzin also asked for her bed jacket, although it was painful for her to put it on.

There were signs all over the hospital, "NO VISITORS AFTER 8 P.M." It was now after 10 p.m.

I went down to the first floor to get a pass, and met a very friendly guard who gave me the pass very easily. I stood at the entrance to the hospital holding the pass and when the Rebbe's car came, I handed it to the security guard so he would allow the Rebbe in.

After his visit, the Rebbe thanked us and asked us if we had food. On Thursday night the Rebbe came again. On Friday the Rebbe came in the afternoon, not late at night, and I was worried he would have to squeeze in among other people in the elevator, so I got someone to open a service elevator. I stood at the entrance

waiting for the Rebbe so I could show him to the service elevator.

Now I was thinking about Motzoei Shabbos. I figured out that I had to be there right after Shabbos to get a pass and elevator for the Rebbe to make *havdalah* for the Rebbetzin. I had no idea how I would get in myself so late, and then how I would get the Rebbe in. I went downstairs to try to figure it out and I was advised that next door was another hospital, Beth Israel Medical Center, and there's a tunnel from Beth Israel to the Hospital for Joint Diseases, from the ER. I would be bypassing the guard on the first floor. Once I was upstairs, I could get a pass for the Rebbe.

I went home and figured out the

earliest moment I could leave after Shabbos to get to Manhattan.

When I arrived there to get the pass for the Rebbe, there was a different security guard, not the one I had befriended.

This one looked surly and hostile. I smiled sweetly and said, "Good evening, sir. May I please have a pass for a very important Rabbi?"

"I'M NOT GIVING ANYONE A PASS. DO YOU KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS?"

"He's more important than President Reagan!"

"I DON'T CARE IF IT IS REAGAN HIMSELF!"

I pulled a \$100 bill out of my pocketbook.

"OH, SO NOW YOU THINK YOU CAN BRIBE ME?"

I burst out crying. I saw the guard's name on his nameplate and said, "Mr. Jerry Brown, I just want you to know that I'm going to put a full page ad in *The New York Times* saying you did not let this rabbi visit his wife. Because of you, no Jew will ever enter this hospital again, and you will be fired from your job by Monday."

He let this sink in.

"Okay, okay," he grumbled, handing me the precious pass. "BUT THIS IS THE LAST TIME!"

I knew the Rebbetzin was coming home Monday and I knew the Rebbe would come on Sunday during the day, because there was a *farbrengen* Sunday night. So I said, "Fine."

I got to the front door and the Rebbe was already standing there waiting. I gave him the pass.

HAVDALAH

TWO MINUTES LATER, smoke alarms went off in the hospital. Nurses sprang into action and started closing all doors. The security guard started screaming, "What's going on here??" We quickly realized that it was the Rebbe's *havdalah* candle that had set off the smoke alarm. By the time the hospital staff realized, *havdalah* was over and the smoke was gone.

The very hostile guard, Jerry Brown himself, came to investigate, and I was scared. I hid in the ladies' room until it grew quiet.

The Rebbe always made *havdalah* for the Rebbetzin, even if he was in 770 and had to go back. He would go home, make *havdalah*, and go back to 770.

THE REBBE WON'T LEAVE

WHEN THE REBBETZIN came home, the Rebbe wanted her to have 24-hour nurses. My father had put me in charge of the arrangements. The nurses knew that if they wanted to go on vacation they had to clear it with me well ahead of time. Any person who worked in the Rebbe's house had to be vetted carefully. We couldn't take just anyone.

My father visited the Rebbetzin daily and sent me regards from her. But one Sunday night I got a phone call from the Rebbetzin. She said, "Everything is fine but I have a little problem. I apologize, I would never ask you to do anything. I know you're busy with little children—"

I said, "Please, I would do anything for the Rebbetzin! Anybody would!"

She said, "The night nurse usually comes at 8, but it's now 8:20 and she's not here yet. At this point I can manage with the walker but my husband refuses to go to 770 until the nurse comes."

I remember thinking, what would be so terrible if the Rebbe would sit in their tremendous library? But the Rebbetzin wanted him to be able to go to 770, where she knew *chassidim* were waiting.

It was Sunday night. How would I find a nurse? The Rebbetzin knew it was impossible, but—

I called the nursing office and got the answering service. I made up a story. It's a big emergency, the Rebbetzin is very weak, your nurse didn't show up, she can't be left alone... I made it sound like a very dire situation.

They couldn't reach anyone except one nurse who told the male dispatcher that it was too far for her to get to Brooklyn. I said to the dispatcher, "What if we send her a limousine?" He said, "Seriously?" I said, YES. The nurse agreed. We sent a limo, the nurse came, the Rebbetzin was so thankful, and the Rebbe went to 770.

The Rebbetzin never wanted to come between the Rebbe and the *chassidim*.

Rabbi Akiva's wife Rochel sent her husband to learn for 12 years. When he got back she said, "I would let him go for another 12." He returned after 24 years with 24,000 students and said, "All that I am, all that you have, is all in her *zchus*."

Had the Rebbetzin thought of herself, her loneliness, her pain, her discomfort, we would not have had the Rebbe we had. She put herself aside for him, for the *chassidim*, so that Moshiach should come sooner. ❀

This article is based on a talk given by Mrs. Esther Sternberg to The Crown Heights Women's Circle (chwomeniscircle.com). More articles by Mrs. Sternberg may be read at nsheichabadnewsletter.com/archives/chabadrebbetzins.