

“I’LL THINK ABOUT IT!”

Chaya Shuchat
interviews
Tobi Hendel

**With nine children and more than 50 grandchildren ka”h, I can no longer keep up with everyone’s birthdays and milestones. And no matter what I give, there are always complaints that someone else got a bigger, nicer or more expensive gift... (Bayla K., 68)*

**I grew up with one sister. We’ve never been close. Since I became frum 10 years ago, we’ve hardly spoken at all. We have so little in common and every conversation seems to end in an argument... (Miriam R., 35)*

**I grew up in a very simple home. My sister married into a wealthy family, and whenever I visit her luxurious home it makes me feel inadequate. I just start to focus on everything we are missing and how shabby my children look in comparison. I’ve started to avoid spending time with her... (Perel V., 36)*

**My brother-in-law is a real loudmouth. No matter what the topic, he always has to say his opinion and he doesn’t care how it makes other people feel. I try to avoid him as much as possible, but I know it makes my sister feel bad... (Frayda G., 28)*

WITH ALL THE RECENT

upheaval and loss in the world, R”l, there has been an awakening in the Chabad community and in the Jewish world in general to strengthen in *shalom*, to end the *gezeirah* and end this *galus*. Many *shluchim* have taken this initiative to heart and settled long-standing differences. What better place to start than by making peace at home? So many family rifts start over the pettiest matters—a hurtful comment, a snub, a misunderstanding. The result is coldness, distance, estrangement. Siblings stop speaking to one another; cousins grow up hardly knowing one another. How do we prevent this? How do we reverse the terrible damage caused by years of *machlokes*?

Mrs. Tobi Hendel, *shlucha* in Migdal Ha’emek and mother of 15, sat down to speak with the *N’shei Chabad Newsletter* and share the secret to raising a large family whose members all respect one another and get along with one another. Tobi’s approach is simple, practical, and down-to-earth, yet profound.

THE RULES FOR GETTING ALONG

and having good relationships with siblings are no different from the rules for getting along with anyone else. People who struggle with getting along with siblings tend to struggle with getting along with people in general. Part of life is learning how to deal with conflict, whether with a boss, a neighbor, a co-worker or a friend. If you want your children to grow up to get along with one another as adults, those lessons start in childhood. We need to teach them to respect boundaries, not to get involved in other people's business, and to appreciate what they have without looking at what everyone else has. It is our job as parents to teach them to be polite and kind, and to express themselves with dignity and respect.

Sometimes we think that among family members we can let these rules fall by the wayside. We're comfortable with each other and will be there for each other no matter what, and therefore we can speak our minds openly. But with family members we may need to be even more careful with the words we use. These are relationships that are important and we want them to last a lifetime. A rift between brothers can reverberate for generations, *R"l*.

PREVENTING JEALOUSY

One of the biggest sources of conflict among family members is simply jealousy and, very often, the parents are the ones responsible. The best way to avoid this problem is to make sure that whatever you give to one child, the others should not even know about. My children know that whatever we give is private and

should not be discussed with other siblings.

If I help out one child with a purchase, whether it's a new sweater or a new refrigerator, they keep it to themselves. If someone asks, "Where did you get that sweater?" my daughter might tell them the name of the store, but she will not mention that I bought it for her. It is understood that nobody else has to know.

We also need to be careful when giving praise or recognition. If one child wins a prize in school or gets an especially good mark—make a big deal out of it in front of that child, but not in front of the others. Everyone has their own talents and strengths. Nobody should feel bad or feel that they need to compete with a sibling. Even when one sibling has a baby, making too much of a big deal out of it in front of the others can be hurtful to the one who's trying to have a baby.

RESPECTING BOUNDARIES

We tried to train our children that we don't speak about personal issues in front of anyone else. When a child has something they want to discuss with us, we discuss it in a private place. No other sibling will ask, "What were you talking about?" It's nobody else's business. Each child gets my full attention with no comments or opinions from anyone else.

If an adult child of ours walks into the house and sees us talking with another adult child in the office, the newcomer will say, "Oh, excuse me," and walk away. Of course, if we're sitting at the kitchen table then he or she is free to join. But if we're in the office—or in any room with the door closed—it's understood that this is private. There are times for the entire family to get together as a group, and there are times when one child needs to spend time alone with me, my husband, or both of us, to discuss something confidential, and all the siblings know to respect that.

Everyone says a *shvigger* has to be quiet, can't say her opinion. If she does, she's mixing in, and making trouble. But the *shvigger* feels she has good advice, things she has learned from experience, things that could help. So, the *shvigger* feels she's holding herself back from saying something she thinks is important to say, because she is not allowed to say it. This may cause her to feel uncomfortable, to say the least.

When my children get married, I tell them that sometimes I like to say my opinion. HOWEVER, it is



Rabbi Yisroel Yosef and Tobi (Popack) Hendel at their 1974 wedding.

only my opinion, and does not obligate them in any way. They can consider if there is anything in what I said that they can use, and if not, not. I tell them that I'll be very upset to ever hear that they did something because I said, when it wasn't what they really wanted to do.

This causes us to always have open conversations, with no pressure, and no hard feelings. I can say my opinion, and they will do what they decide!

NO GOSSIP

Another rule in our family is that nobody talks about anyone else behind her back. If someone shares confidential information with me nobody else will hear about it from me. No matter what their news is, whether it's good or bad *ch"v*: Someone is pregnant, someone is taking a trip, someone

is going through an illness—I am not going to spread it. If you want to share your news, you share it when and with whom you choose. There are no hurt feelings over why this one was told before that one, because everyone understands that they are not entitled to know everyone's private information. In some families there are one or two people who know everyone else's business and seem to think it's their job to keep everyone else updated. There is no need for that. If any child or grandchild asks me a question about someone else in the family, I always tell them, "If you want to know what's going on with Moshe, ask Moshe." Because of this, my children speak to me freely knowing that their information will stay confidential.

Family Whatsapp groups can be a valuable tool to keep in touch, to share pictures and milestones. They can also become another source of tension and drama. It depends on the tone you set. In our family Whatsapp group I try to share things that are meaningful and uplifting. Before a Yom Tov or a *yoma d'pagra*, we might share a *vort* from one of our Rebbeim. Children on *shlichus* might share pictures of their latest event. But we steer clear of heavy or controversial topics. If someone has a personal matter to discuss we discuss it one-on-one.

MAKING THE OTHER HAPPY

When a couple gets married and each one is focused on how the other one is going to make *them* happy, they will not have a good marriage. But when each one is focused on what they can do for the other—now, that's a good marriage. It's the same thing in a family. Don't focus on what your siblings do for you or how they are making *you* happy. Think about what you can do to make your siblings happy. Try to do what you can to keep *shalom* in the family. Accept people the way they are. Don't argue. Listen to what each one has to say.

When there's a large family with many

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Hendel, Migdal Ha'emek



Our family picture, taken for the *Sefer Hashluchim*, about 30 years ago.

different personalities, and especially when they get married and you add in-laws to the mix, it may not always be possible to have a deep, fulfilling relationship with every sibling. It's an ideal, it's a huge *brachah*, but it's not always in our hands. But we can all strive to have a friendly, cordial and respectful relationship with all our family members, free of tension and resentment.

Don't keep score. Don't keep track of who called, who visited, who gave a gift and for what. Be there for your siblings when they are in need. Whatever you do for your sibling, give generously with a full heart without expecting anything in return. It does not diminish you at all to be the bigger one: You be the one who gives in, the one who apologizes first, the one who always calls or keeps in touch or is there for the others, even when others don't think of you. As my father-in-law, Rabbi Yitzchak Hendel, *a"h*, would always say, *l'vater l'maan hashalom*. Let it go for the sake of peace.

Whatever we focus on, we strengthen. When you focus on the negative in your family members, you only increase in negativity. Focus on the positive, on everything you like and appreciate about them, and your relationship will flourish.

ON GIFT GIVING AND BIRTHDAYS

When there is a large family *ka"h*, with many children and grandchildren, birthdays and anniversaries can be a big stress for the grandparents, trying to remember to send everyone a card or gift. There is no need for parents to put pressure on themselves to send something or call every child on their birthday. In our family, when a child or grandchild has a birthday it is their responsibility to call the grandparents to give a *brachah* and ask for a *brachah*. If they call, we have a nice conversation and they get their birthday wishes. If they didn't call, nobody has any *tainos* on anyone.

I don't send birthday gifts to my children as a matter of routine. If I see a nice book or game that just came out, I might buy a dozen and give one out to

each family. On my own birthday I may give each child something meaningful to mark the occasion. It is entirely at my discretion when to give gifts; they are not expected and certainly there are no comparisons going on between children and grandchildren.

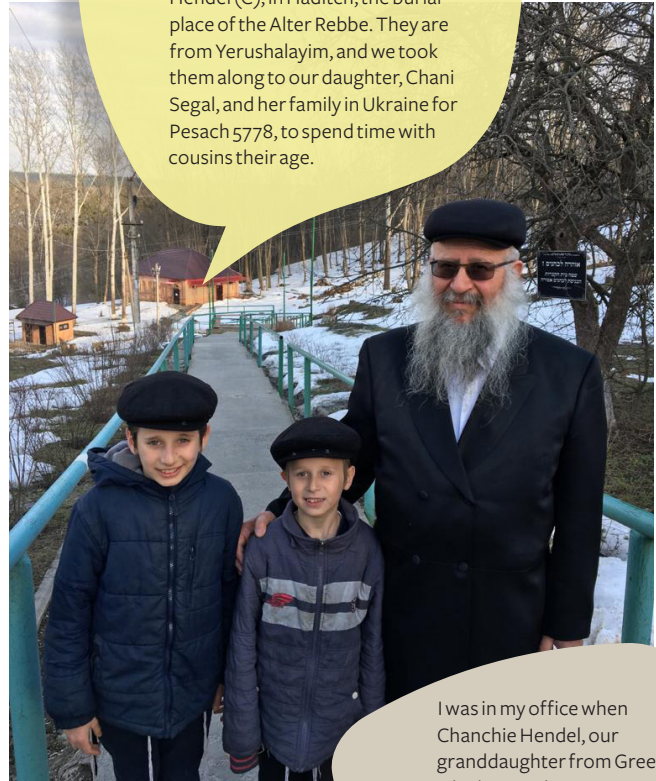
Does it seem that birthdays are hardly noticed? The opposite is true! In our family, all birthdays, as well as all happy occasions, milestones and accomplishments, of adults and children alike, are celebrated by the entire family worldwide in a very exciting way. We have a family Whatsapp group, and a zoom meeting room. When anyone has one of the above or any other reason to celebrate (we're always looking for reasons to celebrate), everyone who can writes or speaks to bless, compliment, etc. Yes, we get excited over everything, even a

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Three bar mitzvah-age grandsons, Eli Chaim Hendel from Montreal, Menachem Hendel from Yerushalayim, and Eliyahu Edelman from Haifa, spent Succos together with us in Migdal Ha'emek. After Succos we went to Yerushalayim for Menachem's bar mitzvah (Tishrei 5779).



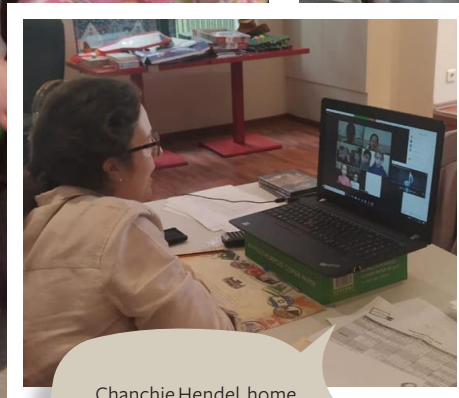
My husband, Rabbi Yisroel Yosef Hendel, with our two grandsons, Levi Meir Hendel (L) and Yekusiel Hendel (C), in Haditch, the burial place of the Alter Rebbe. They are from Yerushalayim, and we took them along to our daughter, Chani Segal, and her family in Ukraine for Pesach 5778, to spend time with cousins their age.



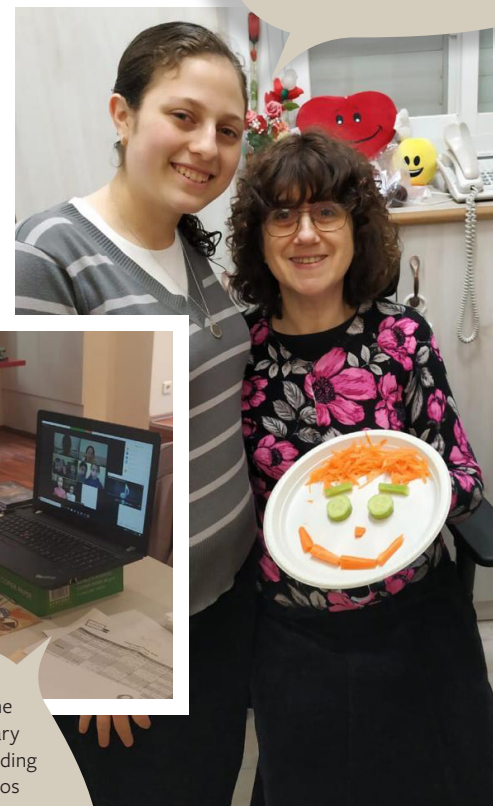
I was in my office when Chanchie Hendel, our granddaughter from Greece who lives with us to go to school in Israel since 7th grade, brought a healthy and happy surprise that she had made for me!



Granddaughters at a worldwide cousins' Kinus Tzivos Hashem, led by Chanchie, while the world is on corona lockdown.



Chanchie Hendel, home in Greece from seminary because of corona, leading a worldwide Kinus Tzivos Hashem for all elementary-age girl cousins recently.



picture a child drew. This way, although we live all over the world, we are constantly in touch, updated with what's happening with one another and happy for and celebrating one another's happy occasions! Much more meaningful and heartwarming than a card or gift.

FAMILY SIMCHAS

When there is a *simchah* in the family, it is understood that not every sibling can come in for everything. Fortunately, we were able to see to it that all the children attended all their siblings' weddings. Of course, grandchildren attend if they live nearby. For everyone else, it's a matter of what works out for them and there are no expectations. For bar mitzvahs, we try to plan that all the cousins who have a bar mitzvah the same year should get together. For example, when my grandson in New Jersey had his bar mitzvah, a grandson from Montreal and a grandson from Argentina who were also turning 13 that year came in. Before a family *simchah* we send out a private WhatsApp to each family member informing them of the upcoming *simchah* and asking who is able to come in. It's confidential; nobody has to know everyone's *cheshbonos* for why they can or cannot come. Sometimes, depending on the circumstances, we may help out with travel expenses.

When my grandchildren from overseas are visiting, we try to invite the children who live in Israel to come over at the same time so they can get to know one another. For example, when my granddaughter from Argentina came to Israel we invited all the Israeli granddaughters to come for Shabbos. When my grandsons come from Greece I invite all the grandsons that age. One year when I went to Ukraine for Pesach I took along two grandchildren from Israel who had cousins there the same age. When possible to do this, it brings closeness between cousins. Even before carona, we were holding Zoom meetings for all cousins. When one grandson has a *hanachas tefillin*, all the bar-mitzvah age boys in the family participate. We work to create opportunities to be close because we live far apart.

Of course, even if you are unable to attend a *simchah* for a niece or nephew, every sibling should acknowledge and participate in the *simchah* by calling, wishing mazel tov, etc. Nowadays with technology we have many ways to share in family *simchas* even when we are geographically far apart.

GASHMIUS STANDARDS

One common source of tension in a family is when siblings have different standards of living. One sibling may be more affluent than the other, live in a nicer home, or have better housekeeping skills. We tried to raise our children not to value *gashmius* and not to judge people according to how they dress or how they look. My children were neat, clean, and put-together, but it was okay to wear hand-me-downs. Which of our friends or neighbors bought a new house or a new car or a new dining room set were not topics of discussion in our home. It's hard to raise children with *chassidische* values when you put a lot of stress on *gashmius*. When you make a big fuss over what your children wear and want them to look perfect at all times, you instill in them the belief that this is what you value. Teach them to value *mitzvos*, *mitvza'im*, good behavior, and accomplishments. Don't discuss what other people have or don't have. Teach your children to be grateful for whatever Hashem gives them rather than comparing themselves to others. What you have is not a reflection of your worth or value as a person.

FINDING COMMON GROUND

As children grow up they can have very different views and different politics. As they get married, the children-in-law can be quite different from one another, with different backgrounds and different goals. In our family we don't bring up political differences. We have enough in common that we don't have to bring up controversial issues. We don't need to focus on things that we disagree on or that will make people uncomfortable. We can always find neutral topics to discuss. If you like to talk about deep topics but your sister-in-law likes to talk about *sheitels*, meet her where she's at.

We don't all have to have the same opinion. The *talmidim* of Rabbi Akiva loved one another so much that they couldn't understand how the others didn't have the same values and priorities. They wanted so badly to get the other to accept the truth as they saw it, and this led them to treat one another with disrespect. In a family we learn to accept that people can have a different opinion. We respect differences and preferences.

Some people love to debate and exchange ideas even if it gets heated. Not everyone enjoys it. If someone



Most recent wedding: Tobi is seated next to the *kallah*, her daughter Malky, who married Avi Alperovits on 28 Tishrei 5778 (2017).

expresses an opinion you disagree with, think whether it's worth it to give an opposing view. Is there anything to gain? Does the person want to hear it? Are they receptive? Do they enjoy the give and take? If you feel you have information to share, whether about health or education or nutrition or any other topic, you can mention it to the person: Call me if you want to know more about X. Trust people to be able to think for themselves, to seek out information for themselves, to form their own opinions. If they want your advice they will ask for it.

JUDGING FAVORABLY

One of the best skills for keeping the peace within the family is learning to give people the benefit of the doubt. Whatever you want to say can be expressed in a polite way or in an aggressive way. Some people have a tendency to argue, to have *tainos*, to find things to pick apart. They always have a *shtech*, a comment, a criticism. These traits are not conducive to good relationships with others—not with siblings, not in a marriage, not with neighbors, co-workers or friends.

If you start off a conversation with, "I called you twice and you didn't call me back!" it won't be a pleasant

conversation. Before you say anything, think, do I want to have an argument over this? What's the purpose? Don't say anything that puts people on the defensive. Give them space; they probably had a reason for acting as they did.

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or de-escalate. You don't need to respond to every insult, every hurt feeling. If someone makes a hurtful comment, the best response is just to smile. Later, when you are completely calm, if you've thought it over and feel that there must be some response, you can ask the person to discuss it and tell them how you felt.

Don't be too quick to take offense. Think, "He probably didn't mean it that way," or, "I'm sure it slipped out before she had a chance to think. I'm sure she regrets it already." Give the best spin possible on what people say. Don't always parse what they say to find an insulting or negative meaning. And once you've given the benefit of the doubt, just move on. Don't give it another thought. Find something else to do; pretend that you have to take a phone call or the baby needs you. Don't continue a conversation that you feel is going downhill.

When you're taken aback by a comment and don't know what to say, a good response is, "I hear what you say and I'll think about it." This doesn't only apply to siblings; it's with anyone. Never argue. If you don't like what they said, put it out of your mind. Don't stew over it or hold on to it for years. You will gain much more than you lose by learning to forgive and forget.

Sometimes when there's an issue going on in our community and emotions are running high, I'll say, "I'll talk about it, but not today." Wait a few days until feelings calm down a little. It's impossible to discuss anything when people are worked up.

There's something I never noticed until my daughter's teacher pointed it out. She said, "Whenever I give a comment or criticism to another child, they might get upset or sulk about it. But with your daughter, when

For example, there was one girl who would always say, "I can't handle this!" and then I heard her mother using the same expression.

I tell her off she just accepts it and goes on." Perhaps that's because if I need to say something to a child, the next minute we move on and talk about other things. We don't dwell on the negative.

We make a practice in our home of being *dan l'kaf zchus* and not imputing negative motivations to people. When my children tell me about someone who upset them, we try to find a reason. "He was probably having a bad day and that's why he spoke that way." Maybe one day you will understand the reason; most likely you never will. If someone is curt or abrupt or short-tempered, you don't know what kind of life they have or what kind of stress they're under. When a car is driving erratically on the highway I might say something like, "They must be in a rush to get to an important meeting." Once my daughter was about eight and she was sitting in the back seat when a car zoomed ahead of us. She said, "Maybe they're on the way to the hospital to have a baby!" I laughed and asked her what made her think of that, and she said, "I once heard you say that!"

SPEAK LOW AND SLOW

The atmosphere in the home is determined by the mother's tone of voice. My motto is, "Speak low and slow." Then whatever you say will be heard. I was once speaking on the phone with a very successful, intelligent woman, a well-known public speaker. As we were speaking I heard her yelling at her children in the background: "How many times do I have to tell you to get into bed and go to sleep!" At the end of our conversation I said, "Allow me to say one thing. Whatever you want to say, say it low and slow." Later she told me that this piece of advice changed her life.

Make a commitment never to raise your voice. It only drains your energy and creates a negative atmosphere in the home. If we want our children to grow up to be peaceful adults, we have to raise them in an environment of peace.

When a parent yells at a child, what do you think the child is thinking? Are they absorbing or internalizing what you have to say? Or are they thinking, "When is that *meshuggeneh* going to be quiet already?" When you yell, you're not being *mashpia* on them. You're not being *mechanech* them. If you're feeling out of control, leave the room. Drink a glass of cold water. Give yourself a break. Come back to deal with them when you're feeling

calm and collected. No matter what they're doing, you're not going to make it better by yelling. Even if you get temporary compliance, you are doing long-term damage to their psyche and self-esteem. The way you speak to your children is the way they'll talk to each other.

When you speak in a loud, emotional tone of voice, you may notice that often the one to whom you are speaking (spouse, child, child-in-law, employer, employee, friend, neighbor) doesn't answer you. Don't think that it's because they agree with you! It's simply because they feel overwhelmed and overpowered, and don't feel their point of view will be heard. So, if you only wanted to say your opinion, and think you are forcing your opinion on others, you were half right. You said it, but they weren't convinced; they only knew they didn't stand a chance against you, and that you wouldn't care about or hear their opinion. Next time, try speaking low and slow; you may be surprised that you will start hearing what the other person has to say. But remember, do not say a word until they finish expressing themselves, and when they finish, never start by knocking what they said, but rather start your sentence with something that will reflect what *they* said to show that you listened, understood and care. Your first sentence might start with, "I see that you think/feel..." Afterwards you can continue "I think, though, that ... because ..." You will start having calm meaningful conversations, and develop true relationships with people close to you. Often, a while after I tell this to someone, they come back to say, "This advice has changed my life!"

I teach high school girls, and sometimes I'm taken aback by the expressions they use or the way they react to things. Then at PTA I meet their mothers and I hear the same words coming from their lips. For example, there was one girl who would always say, "I can't handle this!" and then I heard her mother using the same expression. When your children hear you say things like, "Why is G-d doing this to me," they start to think of themselves as victims. Instead, make a habit of saying, "G-d is doing this *for* me." Our children are watching and absorbing everything we say. The way we handle pressure, the way we react to what happens to us is how they will respond to stress in their own life.

When my son Levi *a"h* passed away at the age of 13, during *shivah* I tried to be strong and to encourage my children by sharing stories, *meshalim* and different ideas. Later I would hear my children repeating my words to others to be *mechazek* them. Our words are powerful. We have the power to build or to destroy. Never lose

an opportunity to speak to your children, to share with them words of inspiration. You are instilling in them strength and values that will last a lifetime.

AFTER 120

One thing that causes many families to be torn apart, *R"l*, even after many years of getting along nicely, is the settlement of the parents' estate. Parents should ensure that the children's inheritance is divided fairly and that the will is written legally and according to Jewish law. That way parents can be assured that their children will continue to live in peace and harmony with one another even after they have passed on. If you feel squeamish about the concept, remember that writing a will is a *segulah* for a long life!

ACHDUS AMONG CHASSIDIM WILL BRING MOSHIACH

At the *farbrengen* of the 13th of Nissan 5726, the 100th *yahrzeit* of the Tzemach Tzedek, the Rebbe told the following story. The Tzemach Tzedek was once in Petersburg for a conference that the government called for the Rabbanim, to get them to agree to various restrictions on Judaism and Jewish education. The Tzemach Tzedek stood strongly against these restrictions. As a result, he was arrested a number of times over the course of the conference. In the end he was victorious and they didn't make the reforms that they originally wanted to make. After it was over, one of the Rabbanim, Rabbi Yitzchok of Volozhin, asked the Tzemach Tzedek, "How could you endanger the future of *chassidim*? Had you not succeeded and had they done you harm, the *chassidim* would *ch"v* have been left without a Rebbe!" The Tzemach Tzedek answered, "I'll answer you the way the *Gemara* answers a question, with two possibilities: My sons can continue the dynasty, and *chassidim* with their *achdus* will bring Moshiach."

When the Rebbe told this story, he added: "Now we are 100 years after the passing of the Tzemach Tzedek, and although there aren't any sons, *chassidim* with their *achdus* will break the darkness of *galus* and bring the *Geulah!*" ❁