





LEGEND

In Her Own Time

Meet Mrs. Bracha Levertov
Crown Heights' Beloved Mikvah Lady

AS TOLD BY MRS. LEVERTOV TO HER DAUGHTER ELKA MATUSOF

MEMORIES

MRS. BRACHA LEVERTOV was born on 29 Nissan 5694 (1934). Her parents, Aaron and Esther Muskal, emigrated from Hungary after World War I and settled in the South Bronx where they raised four children in the path of Torah and *mitzvos*. Although many Jewish immigrants at that time sought to leave the Old World customs behind and assimilate into American culture, the Muskals held tightly to their beliefs and traditions. Aaron was a glazier, and his private trade allowed him to observe Shabbos while supporting his family. Esther was determined to send her children to Jewish schools. There were few yeshivos in America in the 1940s, so Esther sent her son Yosef Shaul to the Lubavitcher Yeshiva on Bedford and Dean,

at the advice of the Kosoniyer Rebbe of the Bronx, Rabbi Pinchas Shalom Halevi Rottenberg.

This was the beginning of the family's odyssey to Chabad. Malka Sara, Bracha's older sister, married a Lubavitcher named Chaim Aaron Kuperman, and Bracha was soon introduced to Lubavitch through Shlomo Carlebach.

In the early 1950s, Bracha was a teenager in Bais Yaakov High School. The Lubavitcher Rebbe had just become Rebbe, and he passionately practiced and encouraged outreach to fellow Yidden. Shlomo Carlebach, who was then affiliated with Chabad, began to learn Torah and Chassidus with a group of secular college students. Bracha's friend joined the group and told Bracha that she should too.

Educated in Bais Yaakov, Bracha had always learned about the importance of a Jew following

Torah and *mitzvos*, for otherwise one would be punished and burn in *Gehennom*. Bracha would pass by the stores that were open on Shabbos and feel overwhelmed by compassion for the owners, thinking how they would suffer in *Gehennom*. She wished she could bring them closer to Torah and *mitzvos*, but had no idea how. After hearing about the charismatic personality of Shlomo Carlebach, who was known to speak to people just once and inspire them to become *baalei teshuvah*, Bracha decided to see for herself how he accomplished this.

Bracha joined Carlebach's learning group and was quickly enamored with Chassidus. She and her friend were more educated in Torah than most of the students in the group, but they had never been exposed to the deeper perspective that Chassidus provides. The focus on the positive (with so little mention of *Gehennom*) sparked a desire in Bracha to learn more and more. Because Bracha was religious, Shlomo Carlebach asked her if she could help him recruit members for their study group. He gave her phone numbers of individuals. Bracha was not only learning Chassidus for the first time, but she was also learning how to actively take part in Jewish outreach.

FIRST YECHIDUS

In 1952, Shlomo Carlebach took the group to the Rebbe for *yechidus*. As the group filed into the Rebbe's room one by one, the Rebbe gave each person a penetrating gaze. His gaze was so strong that Bracha had to look away. The Rebbe spoke a bit about the *parshah*, and concluded by saying that each of them should share their Torah knowledge with other Jews and encourage them to keep *mitzvos*. Bracha was incredulous. She thought, *What? These people know nothing and are hardly observant! How could they share their Torah knowledge if they hardly have any?* Only years later, when Bracha became a Lubavitcher herself, did she start to truly understand the Rebbe's empowering philosophy. The Rebbe saw the potential in every Jew, no matter how much or how little Torah he knows, to make a difference in the world around him. Even if he only knows the letter Aleph, he can and must teach that!

Bracha left the *yechidus* feeling that something had stirred deep inside of her. More than inspired, she felt transformed. The Rebbe had charged her with a crucial mission, and she was eager to fulfill it. She and her friend wanted to run back to the Rebbe's room to ask for guidance on how to proceed, but they were told that once you go out of the Rebbe's room, you don't go back in. Someone advised them that they could go speak to the Rebbe's secretary, Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Isaac Hodakov. Rabbi Hodakov was a brilliant man and loyal *chossid* of the Rebbe; when he said something, you knew it was coming from the Rebbe. So they approached Rabbi Hodakov and Bracha, choked with emotion, said, "The Rebbe told us to reach out to other Jews and teach them Torah and impart our knowledge to them, but I feel so inadequate! I have no talents!"

Rabbi Hodakov answered her in Yiddish: "Dig deeper into yourself and you will find the wellsprings."

Bracha's friend told Rabbi Hodakov, "I feel confident, and I feel that I have the knowledge." Rabbi Hodakov answered her: "When you leave school and go out to

the world, that will be the test of how much knowledge you have."

In those days, small *farbrengens* were held in the upstairs small *zal*, with the adjoining room reserved for the women. At one *farbrengen*, Bracha felt herself being looked up and down by Rebbetzin Mentlik and Rebbetzin Katz, two sisters whose husbands were the *Rosh Yeshivah* and *Gabbai* of 770, respectively. They started asking her all sorts of questions and were delighted to hear that she was open to the idea of wearing a *sheitel* and marrying a boy with a beard. In the 1950s, most American girls did not want to cover their hair with a *sheitel* or marry boys with beards. There was a scarcity of girls who would be good matches with the 770 *bachurim*.

Bracha's brother, Yosef Shaul, had been attending the Lubavitcher Yeshiva in Pittsburgh, Achei Tmimim, which was founded by the *shluchim*, Rabbi Shalom and Mrs. Chaya Posner. Moishe Levertov was the *mashgiach* there. Yosef Shaul was impressed by Moishe, and when he returned home for the summer he told his sister that he had found the best *bachur* for her. "He's so kind, so smart, so *chassidish*, so devoted, and so caring," Yosef Shaul would say. "On Shabbos afternoon, he discourages the boys from taking naps and instead learns *Likutei Torah* with them." Bracha was convinced about Moishe before she even met him! However, she was dating someone else at the time that Moishe's name came up.

Bracha was confused about the *bachur* she was dating. She went into *yechidus* to consult the Rebbe about it.

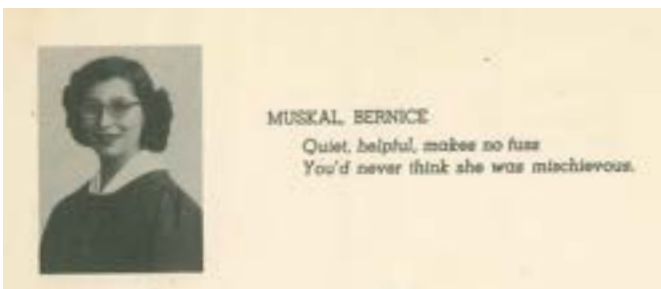
The Rebbe asked her, "How do you feel about him?" She answered, "What I like about him is that he's a *chossid* and a *lamdan*, but I still don't know..."

The Rebbe then asked her, "Because he doesn't play ball?"

(Possibly the Rebbe was alluding to him not being a typical American boy who plays baseball.)

The Rebbe continued, "Nu, you could see him another time. The fourth time is not like the third time, and the fifth time is not like the fourth time." But even after she met him again, Bracha was still unsure although the *bachur* wanted to get engaged, so Bracha wrote to the Rebbe asking whether she should accept his proposal, leave him, or try to go out with someone else also. The Rebbe underlined "also," and that is when she went on a date with her future husband, Rabbi Moishe Levertov.

When Bracha got engaged, her mother would tease the new *chassan*, "Whom do you like better? The Rebbe's *brachah* or my Bracha?" During the engagement, Moishe and Bracha sent letters to each



Bais Yaakov High School yearbook, 1951. The caption fits perfectly to this day!



The wedding of Bracha and Moische Levertov, Tes Adar 5715 (1955).

The Rebbe going out of 770 to be *mesader kiddushin* at Bracha and Moische's wedding.



other in which Moische taught Bracha Chassidus. The couple got married on Tes Adar 5715 (1955). The Rebbe was *mesader kiddushin*, one of the last weddings that the Rebbe did so.

Whenever the Rebbe was *mesader kiddushin* for a couple, it was on condition that the *chuppah* be held in front of 770 and the wedding in Crown Heights. All the halls in the neighborhood were small, so if the Rebbe was not *mesader kiddushin*, most couples would make their weddings out of Crown Heights. However, the Rebbe did not immediately inform Moische and Bracha whether he would officiate at their wedding. Moische and Bracha did not book a hall or print invitations until two weeks before the wedding, when the Rebbe answered in the affirmative, much to their delight.

"I FEEL SORRY FOR HER"

After *sheva brachos*, the couple moved to Pittsburgh. Moische continued his work in the Yeshiva and Bracha taught kindergarten in Achei Tmimim, ran Mesibas Shabbos, and founded Bnos Chabad. Although they lived in a tiny apartment, they frequently hosted guests.

Moische and Bracha did not have children for over three years. They consulted with a doctor who told

Bracha that stopping to keep the laws of *taharas hamishpachah* would solve the problem. Bracha refused to accept that.

"I feel sorry for her," the doctor told a mutual acquaintance. "She'll never have children because she insists on keeping those laws."

During a *yechidus*, the Rebbe gave Bracha a small *siddur* as a *brachah* for children. Bracha cherished and guarded that *siddur*. She did not allow anyone else to use it, to prevent it from wear and tear, and *davened* from it every day for many years until it completely fell apart.

The year 1957 brought a series of unfortunate events into Moische and Bracha's life. In shul, the *sefer Torah* fell to the floor. Soon after, the older division of the Yeshiva in Pittsburgh closed down because of a lack of funds. Moische and Bracha came back to New York and moved into Bracha's parents' home while Moische began looking for a job. The Shabbos after they arrived in New York, Bracha suffered an appendicitis attack. Her father, Aaron, turned white as he remembered how his sister Rochel had died from appendicitis because she would not go to the



Bracha and Moische Levertov after their *chuppah*.

hospital on Shabbos. Moishe, a *talmid chacham*, said it was absolutely permitted to call the doctor and go by ambulance to the hospital for *pikuach nefesh*. Indeed, Bracha was successfully operated on, and the appendix was removed in time.

Moishe and Bracha had *yechidus* soon after and told the Rebbe they felt despondent from all the unfortunate incidents that were happening and because they still did not have children. The Rebbe asked Bracha (referring to the appendix), “Did you need it?” Bracha was surprised at the question but answered, “No.” The Rebbe said, “Just like Hashem took something you don’t need out of you, He should put something you do need in!” Shortly after, Bracha became pregnant with her first child, Yosef Yitzchok.

After having two children, Bracha once again struggled to become pregnant. She felt she shouldn’t bother the Rebbe to ask for another *brachah* when she already had received the tremendous blessing of two children. Her sister suggested that she go see Dr. Avrohom Abba Seligson, the doctor whom the Rebbe had recommended when she initially asked for a *brachah* for children. Bracha decided to ask the Rebbe if she should go see Dr. Seligson again. The Rebbe answered, “*Voss darf men gain tzu a doctor? Der Eibershter ken helfen.*” (“Why must you go to a doctor? Hashem can help.”) So Bracha did not go to the doctor, and soon became pregnant with her daughter, Chana. Bracha and Moishe had five children, *bli ayin hara*, all *shluchim* of the Rebbe today.

“WHATEVER COULD COME UP DID COME UP”

Mrs. Bracha Levertov’s first experience as a *mikvah* lady happened spontaneously. She went to *toivel* on a Friday night and arrived to find a heated argument going on. A Russian woman had come to *toivel* with her mother-in-law accompanying her and had insisted on taking a bath. The *mikvah* attendant was refusing to *toivel* her because she had taken the bath on Shabbos which is forbidden. The *mikvah* attendant was saying, “Shabbos! Shabbos!” and the mother-in-law was saying back, “*Mitzvah gedolah!*” Mrs. Levertov intervened and said, “Why don’t we ask a *shaalah*?” The Russian lady said she didn’t know who or where the Rav was. Mrs. Levertov offered to go ask for her. She ran to 770, found



Bracha and Moishe Levertov, 1979.

one of the Rabbanim and described the situation. The Rav responded that if it is the woman’s actual night of *tevilah*, she can *toivel*. Mrs. Levertov relayed the message to the *mikvah* attendant who said, “Okay! Then you *toivel* her!” And Mrs. Levertov did.

Mrs. Levertov has identical twin cousins, Rosie Indig and Sylvia Kaminetzky, who were *mikvah* attendants in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. They were her role models, and Mrs. Levertov decided to follow in their footsteps by joining the newly formed *mikvah* committee when renovations of the Crown Heights *mikvah*, also known as the Union Street *mikvah*, began. She offered her services as a substitute *mikvah* attendant, and a few years later, in 1982, she was asked to fill the position fulltime.

Mrs. Levertov remained the beloved *mikvah* lady of Crown Heights for over 30 years. Her generous smile and palpable warmth helped countless women fulfill the *mitzvah* with joy and ease, and she had the unique honor of preparing the *mikvah* for the Rebbe every time he used it. (As was the *minhag* of some of the previous

The Crown Heights *Mikvah* Committee, 1982. Standing, L-R: Rosie Malamud, Chana Mitchell, Devorie Halberstam, Cyrel Deitsch, Esther Coren, Shterna Weiss, Bracha Levertov, Leah Goldman. Seated, L-R: Seema Goldstein, Goldie Shifrin, Hensha Gansbourg, Nechama Hackner.



The Union Street Ladies' Mikvah

BY THE MIKVAH COMMITTEE

LIVING IN CROWN HEIGHTS, we take certain things for granted. Shuls, yeshivas, kosher grocery stores, take-out food, bakeries, and, of course, *mikvaos*. The Union Street Ladies' *mikvah* at 1506 Union Street was purchased in 1937 by Crown Heights' Agudas Taharas Hamishpachah, and it has been maintained by local women ever since. Approximately 35 years ago, a group of young Lubavitcher ladies decided it was time for an upgrade and they began the momentous task of the first renovations. This included combining two buildings to expand and accommodate the increasing community population. Knowing we had the Rebbe's *brachah* that it should be the nicest and best *mikvah*, we hired architects and contractors along with interior designers. We kept the Rebbe updated and the Rebbe was pleased with our progress.

Our dream finally came to fruition and the renovated *mikvah* became our pride and joy. We now had three *mikvaos*, additional changing rooms, an intercom system and the latest gadgets and conveniences of that time. Most importantly, the Rebbe used this location exclusively and it is imbued with his holy spirit.

As modern technology marches forward, so have we. We introduced an appointment system to help eliminate waiting time. We have upgraded other important systems in the building. The same group of women who renovated years ago recently completed a dramatic interior design transformation, imbuing each room with a unique character and style. The airy reception space and friendly demeanor of the staff help create a positive and welcoming experience

for all visitors. When you enter the building, you can feel the peace, tranquility and holiness of this *mitzvah* and the aura of the Rebbe himself. The Rebbe's *varemkeit* envelopes you as you walk in his footsteps to your room. The Rebbe wanted only the best for his *schechunah*, and we are proud to exemplify his directive to us. We are the only *mikvah* open on Erev Yom Kippur for women. During Tishrei, we host hundreds of women from all corners of the world. We try our best to fill your needs in the most *tzniusdik* way possible, and we are proud to say that we are the Rebbe's *mikvah*.

For more information or to make an appointment, call 718.604.8787 or visit chmikvah.org

Chabad *Rebbeim*, the Rebbe would use the women's *mikvah* due to its higher *halachic* stringency. The Rebbe would only go during the day, while women only use the *mikvah* at night.)

When Mrs. Levertov was offered the position, her husband, Reb Moishe, was initially hesitant. At the time, the role of the *mikvah* attendant was not viewed with the same prestige as it is today. Reb Moishe asked the Rebbe who said to ask a Rav. Reb Moishe went to Rabbi Zalman Shimon Dworkin, the Rav of Crown Heights who was also in charge of the *mikvah*, with his worries. "On the contrary! It's what you make of the position," Rabbi Dworkin said. "Look at Riva Geisinsky, the *mikvah* attendant in East New York, who merited wonderful *shidduchim* for her children!"

The Rebbe had asked Mrs. Stiel, the previous *mikvah* lady of Crown Heights, to always allow any woman (who could not afford the fee) to use the *mikvah*.

The Crown Heights *mikvah* thus has a policy of keeping the price low and allowing every woman to immerse in the *mikvah*, whether or not she can pay.

Mrs. Bracha Levertov took this policy of not turning any woman away a step farther. No matter the time of day or night, Mrs. Levertov would drop everything to help a woman *toivel*. One snowy night, she was woken by the ringing phone at 2 a.m. A man explained that his wife had been unable to go to the *mikvah* earlier due to an emergency, but she wanted to go now. Just that day, Mrs. Levertov had been pained to hear of a neighbor's divorce, and she felt that she would do anything to help a couple's *shalom bayis*. She said yes, but requested that she be picked up. Mrs. Levertov threw on her coat and boots and went outside to wait in the snow. It took some time for the woman to arrive, and all the while Mrs. Levertov thought, "I didn't even take down her name or phone number! What if it was a prank call?" (She had received a prank call not long before.) Fifteen minutes later, the woman arrived, thanking her profusely. Several months later, she sent Mrs. Levertov a tablecloth as a thank-you. This was her second marriage, and she was now expecting a child.

Several times, Mrs. Levertov enlisted the help of her brother-in-law, Reb Sholom Levertov, who was a jeweler and could cut off stubborn rings with special tools. She once sent someone to a local dentist to deal with a *chatzitzah* issue in her teeth. A few days before Pesach one year, Mrs. Levertov noticed a blue mass on a woman's foot. She told the woman to see a doctor the next day. The woman responded that she was too busy now but would do so after Yom Tov. Mrs. Levertov

insisted, "No! Tomorrow!" Finally, the women conceded, and later told Mrs. Levertov, "You saved my life. We caught the issue just in time!" One woman called Mrs. Levertov that she had to come very late because she had no babysitter. Mrs. Levertov told her to come to the *mikvah* with her infant, and Mrs. Levertov took care of the baby while the woman prepared.

Mrs. Levertov felt that *mikvah* is a beautiful and joyous *mitzvah*. She wanted every woman to be comfortable and happy instead of nervous or scared about immersion. She always presented a cheerful attitude and helped soothe any worries. Women recall her trademark "delicious!" instead of just "good" or "okay" after checking their nails. One mother relayed how much Mrs. Levertov helped her daughter when she became a *kallah*. The young bride was nervous about immersing, so Mrs. Levertov told her, "Come, I want to show you something!" She led her to one of the *mikvaos* and said, "The Rebbe *toiveled* here this morning, and you will now have the *zchus* to *toivel* in the very same *mikvah*!" This calmed the girl down, and she *toiveled* with ease. There were a few ladies who had a phobia about immersion, so with a Rav's guidance they made a plan that helped these women fulfill the *mitzvah* comfortably.

Part of Mrs. Levertov's job was to facilitate the conversion process of women. Mrs. Levertov ensured that the process was completely *tzniusdik* and comfortable for the women.

Purim is a happy time, but going to the *mikvah* on Purim can be quite stressful. So Mrs. Levertov tried to cheer up the ladies by dressing up. One Purim, she dressed up as Dr. Rosen (the famous and beloved Crown Heights family doctor). Her white *mikvah* smock served as the lab coat, and she put on a white hood, a stethoscope, and a blood pressure gauge. The first lady who was ready to *toivel* got scared, thinking Mrs. Levertov was actually going to examine her! After that, Mrs. Levertov took off the stethoscope. Other years, Mrs. Levertov wore a white wig or clown costume to bring a smile to the ladies' faces. When asked about their fond memories of the *mikvah* and Mrs. Levertov, many women responded, "Her white *sheitel* on Purim!" *Shluchos* today say Mrs. Levertov is the role model who showed them how to treat ladies going to *mikvah*.

Mrs. Levertov especially wanted to assist women who were struggling to have children. One lady called to say that a *mekubal* had instructed her to *toivel* one hundred times. She asked if that would be okay. Mrs. Levertov said yes, but that she would have to be the last to *toivel* that night. Sure enough, whenever the lady came to the

mikvah, Mrs. Levertov patiently and cheerfully counted the 100 times. *Baruch Hashem*, she had a baby, and many childless women hearing the story wished to *toivel* a hundred times, too. Mrs. Levertov always agreed, and soon became proficient at counting. For a further *zchus* to help ladies who did not have children, Mrs. Levertov gave them the opportunity to open the door to the Rebbe when he came to immerse in the daytime.

Often, significant *shaylos* arose. As Mrs. Levertov says, “Whatever could come up did come up.” Mrs. Levertov always remained calm and supported the woman throughout the process. She would call the Rav to resolve the issue and in most cases the woman was told to go ahead with immersion. On Shabbos and Yom Tov, Mrs. Levertov would walk to the Rav’s home or look for one of the Rabbanim in 770 to ask a question in person. Mrs. Levertov said that she learned more from the hands-on *shaylos* than from all her initial training and studying for the job.

When Mrs. Levertov first started working at the *mikvah*, she was worried about the spiritual consequences of making a mistake. She discussed her concerns with her nephew Mulik Gurewicz, fondly known as Mr. G., principal of Beth Rivkah in Melbourne, Australia. Mr. G. assured her that if a person is truly sincere about working for the *Klal*, *Hashem* sends a *malach* on her shoulder to aid her. Mrs. Levertov feels that the *malach* was indeed on her shoulder.

Mrs. Levertov always felt that being a *mikvah* lady was a great *zchus* because she was able to help so many women keep *taharas hamishpachah*. With love and devotion, she poured all her time and effort into the *mikvah* and for many years dealt with its maintenance. Whether *Rabbanim* were coming to visit or repairs were being done, she was there. She gave countless tours and explained the importance of *taharas hamishpachah* to hundreds of individuals and groups. She lectured on different aspects of *taharas hamishpachah* for many N’shei Chabad events and for various *shluchos* across the world. Mrs. Levertov was featured in the book *Holy Days* by Liz Harris in her description of Crown Heights.

One Friday night, as Mrs. Levertov was crossing the street on her way to the *mikvah*, she was in a car accident. After receiving an insurance settlement, Mrs. Levertov dedicated a portion of the money to help fund a new *mikvah* in S. Fe, New Mexico, where her son Rabbi Berl Levertov is on *shlichus*. Until then, the only *mikvah* in S. Fe was located in an ancient greenhouse with no facilities and garbage bags hung up on glass walls

for privacy. The *mikvah* itself was a hole in the ground with a ladder leading down to the water. Mrs. Levertov’s daughter-in-law, Devorah Leah Levertov (nee Goldberg), couldn’t even try to encourage women to use such a *mikvah* so Mrs. Levertov insisted that they must build one. The exquisite *mikvah* that the Levertovs built was designed like a traditional S. Fe adobe, with scenes of Jewish women throughout history painted on the walls. In addition to it being used as a *mikvah*, many visitors to S. Fe, including non-Jews, come for a tour of the beautiful *mikvah*.

THE REBBE AND THE MIKVAH

Mrs. Levertov felt that her biggest *zchus* was preparing the *mikvah* for the Rebbe and opening the door for the Rebbe when he would come. She also opened the door for him when he was ready to depart.

She was instructed not to speak to the Rebbe, because the Rebbe had special *kavanos* when he went to the *mikvah* which should not be disturbed.

Over the years, Mrs. Levertov never uttered a single word to the Rebbe when he came to the *mikvah*, not even a simple good morning. However, a Rebbe can communicate and intercede on one’s behalf without words. One day, while the Rebbe was using the *mikvah* and Mrs. Levertov was waiting in the foyer, she received a phone call from the *hanhalah* of her son’s yeshiva. They were calling to tell her that they would not give her son permission to transfer to Yeshivas Toras Emes in Yerushalayim that year. The Levertovs had requested permission to transfer their son to Toras Emes, because he was an exceptionally bright and learned boy who was acting out in school due to boredom. They hoped that a school in Eretz Yisroel would be on a higher learning level and challenge him academically. Although their son was immediately accepted into Toras Emes, the *hanhalah* in his current yeshiva was now informing her that they would not allow him to disrupt the yeshiva routine by transferring in the middle of the year. His parents had already written to the Rebbe about this whole dilemma but had not received an answer. Mrs. Levertov almost cried when she heard them reiterating their final decision not to allow him to go

Choked up, she said, “Why don’t you let him go? He’s such a good boy, he just needs to be challenged! And they accepted him. Why do you insist on keeping him until the end of the year? What can I do to help him now?” The *hanhalah* remained firm.

The next morning, Mrs. Levertov received another phone call from the *hanhalah*. They had decided to let him go. It was a sudden turnaround which Mrs. Levertov attributes fully to the Rebbe. Whether the Rebbe intervened directly with the school, or whether it was the power of the Rebbe's thoughts, she does not know. But soon after, she and her husband received a written answer from the Rebbe encouraging them to send their son to Toras Emes. He transferred that year, and did exceptionally well.

From the time of the court battle over the *sefarim* and onward, the Rebbe went to the Ohel more often, and the Rebbe always went to the *mikvah* before going to the Ohel. The *mazkirus* would call Mrs. Levertov in the morning to inform her that the Rebbe was going that day. Usually, Mrs. Levertov was home and would rush to the *mikvah* to prepare everything. But sometimes the call came when she was out on an errand, and Reb Moishe would answer the phone instead. This was before cell phones and beepers, so Reb Moishe would run up to the *mikvah* himself to start the preparations. He would leave a note on the fridge informing Mrs. Levertov of his whereabouts. Mrs. Levertov would then run over to relieve Reb Moishe and finish the preparations.

One day, Mrs. Levertov was out grocery shopping when the *mazkirus* called. Reb Moishe went to the *mikvah* to begin the preparations, but Mrs. Levertov was out for an extended period of time. By the time she arrived at the *mikvah*, he had finished. Mrs. Levertov noticed that Reb Moishe did not fold the sheet as was usually done but had hung it over



Bracha receiving a dollar from the Rebbe.

the railing instead. Mrs. Levertov told Reb Moishe that the sheet needed to be folded. Reb Moishe countered that it's more comfortable for the Rebbe if it is spread out and does not have to be unfolded. Mrs. Levertov insisted that it is not done that way. Their discussion went back and forth until Reb Moishe finally said, "It's your job, so do as you want." Reb Moishe left, and Mrs. Levertov folded the sheet and placed it neatly on the chair.

Usually, after the Rebbe finished, he would leave the sheet crumpled on the chair to indicate he had used it. This time, when Mrs. Levertov entered the room, she was stunned to find the sheet hanging over the railing...

Mrs. Levertov says, "When Moshiach comes the walls will say what husbands and wives discussed between themselves..."

When Mrs. Levertov was growing up in the Bronx, her mother used to take her daughters to *toivel* in the *mikvah* on Erev Yom Kippur. Mrs. Levertov continued this tradition by taking her daughters too, something that only a few elderly ladies in Crown Heights did at the time. The women's *mikvah* was not open for that purpose, so they would arrange a time to *toivel* in the

men's *mikvah* on Lefferts Avenue. When Mrs. Levertov became the *mikvah* lady, she wondered whether this was just a Hungarian *minhag* because so few Lubavitcher



The Rebbe giving out coins for *tzedakah* to the women lined up outside the *mikvah* on Erev Yom Kippur. Mrs. Levertov is standing behind the Rebbe.



Chaya Sarah Zarchi, executive director of Mivtza Taharas HaMishpacha/Mikvah.org, presenting a plaque to Bracha Levertov. Chaya Sarah told the NCN, “Bracha was honored for being the ultimate mikvah lady; everyone loves her.”



women did it. Mrs. Levertov asked Rabbi Dworkin, who said that it's a *minhag* written in the *Shulchan Aruch* for everyone. So Mrs. Levertov publicized it well before Yom Kippur after working out the logistics with the Mikvah

Committee.

The Rebbe came to the *mikvah* several days before Yom Kippur. Generally, the Rebbe always used the Union Street entrance (women's exit). Just that day, a radiator pipe burst and flooded the foyer, so the Rebbe used the Albany Avenue entrance instead. Thus, by *hashgachah pratis*, the Rebbe walked past the receptionist's desk and saw the sign posted on the wall with the information about Erev Yom Kippur *tevilah* (times, rules, fees). Needless to say, the project was successful. Hundreds of women used the *mikvah* on Erev Yom Kippur and emerged spiritually renewed and uplifted. Mrs. Levertov felt that the Rebbe had seen the sign and given his *brachah*.

The Rebbe would *toivel* in the early morning of Erev Yom Kippur and afterwards it would open for women. Many ladies lined up outside the *mikvah* to wait for the Rebbe to exit the building, and the Rebbe would hand

out coins to each of them to give to *tzedakah*. Of course, many women were eager to *toivel* in the *mikvah* that the Rebbe had used (there are three *mikvaos* in the Union Street *mikvah*) and there was always an extra-long line for that *mikvah*.

Things didn't always go smoothly. One Tishrei morning, Mrs. Levertov received the call that the Rebbe was coming to the *mikvah*. She ran to check if the *mikvah* was filled and the water was heated. To her dismay, the water was a dark black color in all three *mikvaos*. Mrs. Levertov tried to empty and refill them to no avail. She called the city to find out what was the matter, and was informed that there was work being done on the pipes in the area. The sediments that were usually lodged in the joints of the pipes had been dislodged by the vibration of the construction, and now they were running through the water. “Just let it run a little,” the city advised. However, despite many refills, the water remained dirty. The *mazkirus* was informed, and some *bachurim* were sent to help clear it out. Nothing was working, so the *bachurim* went to the Karastirer men's *mikvah* on Eastern Parkway to prepare it for the Rebbe. They spread out towels all over the floor to “clean” it, and the Rebbe *toiveled* there.



The Levertov family (L-R). Sitting: Rabbi Moishe Levertov, Mrs. Bracha Levertov. Standing: Chana Morozow (Melbourne, Australia), Nota Levertov (Aubervillier, France), Berel Levertov (S. Fe, New Mexico), Yosel Levertov (Austin, Texas), Elka Matusof (Crown Heights, New York).

Immediately after, there was a stampede of *bachurim* running to *toivel* there. *Baruch Hashem*, the manager of the *mikvah* had his *parnassah* for the year and the *bachurim* had their turn to feel the *kedushah* of the Rebbe's water.

Meanwhile, back at the ladies' *mikvah*, Mrs. Levertov kept emptying and refilling for several hours until the water became clear. Soon after, the *mazkirus* called in the name of the Rebbe to find out whether the water had cleared in time for the ladies to go at night. Mrs. Levertov was happy to inform the Rebbe that all was clear.

Another time, when Mrs. Levertov's daughter had a baby, she was watching her three little grandsons, ages two, three, and four, when the *mazkirus* called. Mrs. Levertov had no choice but to take the children along. She directed them to stand straight and respectfully and sing when the Rebbe would enter. The Rebbe smiled and motioned with his hand.

The week that the clocks changed, Mrs. Levertov went from room to room of the *mikvah* to reset the time. She took a clock from one room, set it, and put it in the next room, then took the clock from the second room, reset it and put it in the third room, and so on. This way, the minutes would be exactly synchronized in all the rooms. After the Rebbe went to the *mikvah* that week, the *mazkirus* called to say that the Rebbe wanted to inform her that that the clock in his room was not reset to the new time, and it should be changed so as not to cause *chilul Shabbos*, G-d forbid. Mrs. Levertov asked herself how such a simple error could cause *chilul Shabbos*. Then she remembered a story that had

happened to her on Shabbos Yud Shvat.

Mrs. Levertov recalls: "I was on my way to the *farbrengen* with my younger daughter and stopped off at my married daughter's apartment. On my way out, there was oil on the steps and I fell headfirst down a flight of stairs, cutting my forehead and chipping my tooth. I was dizzy and fainted. Hatzalah came, and in the hospital, I got stitches and X-rays. My younger daughter and I were in the basement of the hospital where there were no windows. There was one clock that showed that it was very late. I worried about the *mikvah*. Who would open it up for the ladies? No one knew where I was. I had no money to make a call, so my daughter made a collect call to my older daughter. For those of the young generation, a collect call is when the recipient pays for the call. My daughter tried three times, but no one answered the phone. I thought the phone there must be broken, so we went upstairs to find another phone. Upstairs, there were windows and we saw that it was sunny and bright outside. We realized it was still Shabbos! All because of the clock with the wrong time... Some time later, I suggested that my daughter present a *halachah* of Shabbos at a weekly ladies' *shiur*. How wonderful it was when I learned that this is a *tikkun for chillul Shabbos b'shogeig*."

OTHER PEULOS

Mrs. Levertov was president of N'shei Chabad in New York for a year. She taught women to stand up in respect for Rebbetzin Chana when she attended the



Bracha and her grandchildren at her first *einikel's* wedding (Mendy Matusof to Shternie Gurary). As the picture was taken, Bracha thought to herself: "And the doctor said I will never have children because I keep *taharas hamishpachah*."

N'shei Chabad conventions. She was involved in *mitvza kashrus* and *kasher*ed several kitchens. She demonstrated how to *kasher* chickens to different schools, including Machon Chana and a *mesivta* in Maryland. She visited Jews in prison, went on *mitvza'im*

and taught Torah to strangers on the phone. She was also active in *Chevra Kadisha*.

Mrs. Levertov's husband, Reb Moishe Levertov, was active in Ezras Achim, a Chabad organization that quietly sent massive amounts of material and spiritual aid to Jews in the former Soviet Union. When Ezras Achim started sending *shluchim* disguised as tourists to help and encourage the growing community of Russian refuseniks, Mrs. Levertov was determined to send kosher food across the Iron Curtain. She

bought a canning machine and cooked meat for the *shluchim* to take with them. She would place the cooked meat and broth in the cans, seal them and then cook the cans in her mother's commercial sized pressure cooker to sterilize and vacuum pack the cans. The *shluchim* who crossed the border to Russia all remember these cans of meat. Mrs. Levertov's daughter was recently in Chicago and met one of the Russians who had enjoyed the kosher meat as a *bachur*. He said that it was delicious, and that the Russians all considered Mrs. Levertov a great cook. The meat she so lovingly prepared was usually served at special occasions, such as underground *farbrengens*.

When Mrs. Levertov retired from the *mikvah*, she began painting whimsical pictures of stories from *Tanach*. She is an animated storyteller, and her grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and the students in her children's day schools love hearing her vivid stories about Shimshon Hagibor and Dovid Hamelech. With her youthful spirit and sparkling smile, *baruch Hashem*, she still entertains *kallahs* with her dancing.

Mrs. Levertov gives special mention to these individuals: Rabbi Berel Bell and Rabbi

Levi Garelik, who were instrumental in renovating the *mikvah*. The Rabbanim of Crown Heights. The *Mikvah* Committee that works so tirelessly and for so many decades. The other *mikvah* ladies. Mr. and Mrs. Shlomo and Chana Hershkop, who set up the appointment phone system. Rabbi Berel Levertov, who arranged to have one of the *farbrengen* chairs used by the Rebbe brought to the women's *mikvah*, where it remains and enhances the feeling of *kedushah* til today.

Mrs. Levertov wishes readers to note that while there have been recent extensive renovations at the Union Street *Mikvah*, the original tiles of the *mikvaos* used by the Rebbe have remained. In the blue *mikvah*, all the original tiles besides for the ones on the steps are intact. The wall and floor tiles of the other two *mikvaos* have been changed, but some of the original tiles were inserted among the new ones. Every woman always has the choice of which *mikvah* she would like to use.

May Mrs. Bracha Levertov have *arichus yamim vishonim tovos*, and soon dance her way to the *Geulah!* ❧