

# וואו איר וועל זיין וועסטו זיין

THE LIFE OF REB SHOLOM BER  
GANSBURG, MASHBAK OF THE  
REBBE AND REBBETZIN

WHERE  
I WILL BE,  
YOU WILL BE

RIVKAH SLONIM

**F**or many years, my maternal *zaide*, Rabbi Shneur Zalman Gurary, merited to be involved with the Rebbetzin's medical care as well as other aspects of the Rebbe's household needs. In late 1983, the Rebbe formalized this role, mandating that my *zaide* take charge of the Rebbetzin's daily health and medical needs as they arose. Being so close to Bais Harav, my *zaide* interacted extensively with Reb Sholom Ber Gansburg, a *meshamesh bakodesh* (*mashbak*) in the Rebbe's household; sometimes, he spoke with Reb Sholom Ber multiple times a day.

Growing up next door to my grandparents, I witnessed—without understanding it, at the time—the profound devotion Reb Sholom Ber brought to his holy task. Reb Sholom Ber also became a *de facto* part of our family—like an uncle, always present at family *simchas* and other important events. These words of appreciation on the occasion of his first *yahrtzeit* represent my modest attempt to shine light on a person I consider a largely unknown—and therefore, unsung—hero in the annals of Chabad-Lubavitch history.



The "dining room" table in the library next door to 770 is set with three chairs (seen in the photo is Rabbi Berel Levin, head librarian). The Rebbe, the Rebbetzin, and Reb Sholom Ber ate together.



Reb Sholom Ber Gansburg

**BUT WHO TOOK CARE OF THE REBBE? WHO TENDED TO HIS PHYSICAL NEEDS? WHO WORRIED ABOUT HIM?**

**O**ur Rebbe lit up every space in which he found himself; his ideas served as the laser beam that illuminated the path forward for millions. And yet, everything we saw and whatever we gleaned merely obscured the greater *ohr* (light). Was there anyone who saw the Rebbe in “unguarded” moments? Anyone who can claim to have been in truly close proximity to him on a regular basis?

The entire world rested on the Rebbe’s shoulders, was anchored in his vision and propelled forward by his word. The Rebbe kept a schedule no human could match. His love and passion encompassed every person in the universe. And his faith in people’s potential goodness was unshakable. The Rebbe cared. Deeply and profoundly.

But who took care of the Rebbe? Who tended to his physical needs? Who worried about him?

The answer to these questions is Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka, of course. Fiercely devoted to—and protective of—the Rebbe, she sought to preserve his strength and nourish his spirit. But there came a time when she could not do it all on her own. And after she passed from this world, who would or could presume to take on even the physical dimensions of that role?

Reb Sholom Ber Gansburg is the correct answer. Most don’t know his name, and even those who knew him personally likely did not know the depth of his contributions. That was by design. Confidentiality was an unspoken prerequisite, part of the job description. But that was only the external aspect thereof. Being a *meshamesh bakodesh* required discretion and *bitul*. Reb Sholom Ber embodied these qualities in singular fashion. It was never about him; he was simply a clear glass, a colorless conduit.

Reb Sholom Ber’s calling as a *mashbak* began in his youth, when the Frieddiker Rebbe’s Rebbetzin recognized his knack for fixing things. Before long, she was calling upon him to help in sundry ways around the house. Unlike others who assisted in

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*Bais Harav*, Reb Sholom Ber was given a room in the basement of 770, his residence for many years.

For two decades—from the time the Rebbe assumed the *nesius*, until after the passing of Rebbetzin Nechama Dina—the Rebbe and Rebbetzin, along with a select handful of older *chassidim*, ate their Yom Tov meals in the Friediker Rebbe’s apartment. A few years into this era, Reb Sholom Ber was asked to help set up and then serve at these *seudos*. Additionally, Reb Sholom Ber would accompany the Rebbe’s mother, Rebbetzin Chana, from her apartment to 770, and then back home, on the Leil HaSeder and other Yamim Tovim. Reb Sholom Ber would also assist Rebbetzin Chana in her apartment when needed.

Slowly but steadily, Reb Sholom Ber became the one the Rebbe and Rebbetzin called upon for tasks both large and small. When the Rebbe and Rebbetzin approached their eighties—and especially in 1982, after the Rebbetzin was briefly hospitalized for a leg injury—it became clear that the Rebbetzin needed more assistance on a daily basis to tend to her own needs as well as those of the Rebbe. After some time, the Rebbetzin, in the Rebbe’s presence, asked Reb Sholom Ber to move into their home. From then on, his role as *mashbak* defined his life.

For years, Reb Sholom Ber spent his days and nights devotedly tending to the Rebbe and Rebbetzin. He understood, implicitly, what needed to be done. He served with warmth and diligence, constantly looking for ways and means to do even more. The Rebbe and Rebbetzin trusted Reb Sholom Ber with confidential matters, at times turning to him with highly sensitive assignments. Perhaps the following vignette offers a small window into the unique tenderness of this relationship: Every morning, as the Rebbe left the house for 770, the Rebbetzin would walk him to the front door. When she could no longer do so, she asked Reb Sholom Ber to take on this sacred and intimate role, which he did, each day, from then on.

Although the Rebbetzin broached the subject of payment many times, Reb Sholom Ber adamantly refused monetary compensation for his service, which he perceived as his greatest *zechus*. On one occasion, the Rebbetzin even “threatened” him that she would bring him to a *din Torah* before the Rebbe to adjudicate the matter. He replied that since he lived in their home, and he had enough money, should he take money from the Rebbe to simply put in his bank account? With reluctance, he accepted the gifts she bought him as an expression of her profound gratitude.



On one occasion, Reb Sholom Ber noticed that the Rebbetzin was in pain. At first, she rebuffed his inquiries, insisting she was fine. But finally, after continued questioning, she admitted that, in fact, her hand was hurting her. She said, “I see that I can’t hide this from you, but you must not tell my husband, as I do not want to bother him.” (At that very hour, the Rebbe was conducting a *farbrengen* in 770.) Reb Sholom Ber relayed this information to my grandfather, Rabbi Zalman Gurary, who was charged with overseeing the Rebbetzin’s medical care, and true to what the Rebbe had instructed, my *zaide* conveyed the details of the situation to the Rebbe. When the Rebbe came home that night, before going up the stairs to the second floor, he turned to Reb Sholom Ber and said, “You are hiding things from me, as well?” Reb Sholom Ber explained that if he were to tell the Rebbe (directly), such information might be withheld from him as well (due to the Rebbetzin’s deep devotion to the Rebbe and her not wanting to take him away from his *chassidim*), to the detriment of the Rebbetzin’s health. The Rebbe smiled.

Reb Sholom Ber’s countless acts of service, performed with inimitable love and refinement, afforded him an unprecedented bond with the Rebbe and Rebbetzin.

At the request of the Rebbe, Reb Sholom Ber accompanied the Rebbetzin to

The Rebbe giving a dollar to Reb Sholom Ber Gansburg on 5 Kislev 5750.

*Jem photo # 34949, photo by Chaim B. Halberstam.*

# HE NEVER MISSED AN OPPORTUNITY TO RECEIVE A DOLLAR OR A KUNTRES FROM THE REBBE, AND THE REBBE NEVER FAILED TO GIVE HIM DOUBLE OF WHAT WAS HANDED TO EVERYONE ELSE.

the hospital on what would be the last night of her life. At one point, she asked Reb Sholom Ber to bring her a cup of water. She made the *brachah Shehakol*, articulating each word, and after taking a sip, she said in Yiddish: “Oy, Sholom, you were *mechayeh* me! May the *Aibershter* similarly be *mechayeh* you!” That *brachah* was given to Reb Sholom Ber in the very last moments of her life.

After the Rebbetzin’s passing, the Rebbe dismissed all the other helpers who had been involved in the upkeep and daily operations of his home, retaining only Reb Sholom Ber as his *mashbak*. During this time, the Rebbe showed Reb Sholom

Ber where in his study there were funds to be used for the household as well as for Reb Sholom Ber’s personal needs.

At one point during this period, the Rebbe told Reb Sholom Ber, “*Vu Ich vel zein, vestu zein*. Where I will be, you will be.”

Who can fathom such a *zechus* or understand what those words might mean? Indeed, when the Rebbe moved into 770, he told Reb Sholom Ber to choose a room in the Frieddiker Rebbe’s apartment on the second floor of 770 as his own living quarters. Reb Sholom Ber returned his *neshamah* to his Maker in that very room in 770, making him one of less than ten people who had this *zechus*.

## BRINGING MOSHIACH

**O**n 28 Nissan 5751 after *Maariv*, the Rebbe said a *sichah*. At a certain point, the Rebbe’s tone changed drastically and in an unparalleled cry from the heart, he said: “What more can I do to motivate the entire Jewish people to clamor and cry out, and thus actually bring about the coming of Moshiach? All that has been done until now has been to no avail. For we are still in *galus*.... All that I can possibly do is to give the matter over to you. Now, do everything you can to bring Moshiach, here and now, immediately.... I have done all I can:

from now on, you must do whatever you can....”

A few months later, just before 27 Adar 5752 [Monday, March 2, 1992, the date that the Rebbe suffered a disabling stroke while at the Ohel], this is what happened (in Reb Sholom Ber’s own words):

“I was with the Rebbe in his room in 770, attending to my tasks. Suddenly, the Rebbe began to speak as he paced back and forth in the room. ‘I was born on a Friday. When one is born on a Friday one is always late. I am always late; I can never accomplish all that I want to do...’

“After some time, I summoned

my courage and I said, ‘How can the Rebbe say this? There is no one in the world who accomplished as much as the Rebbe did! The Rebbe changed the world to such an extent that it is beyond recognition... all the *baalei teshuvah* whose lives were transformed in the Rebbe’s *zechus*, the Rebbe literally turned the world around...!’

“And there were additional points that I set forth that I no longer remember.

“Only when I mentioned the term ‘*baalei teshuvah*’ did the Rebbe say, ‘*Nu, gut*,’ and his holy spirit seemed to calm.”



L-R: Reb Chessed Halberstam, Reb Sholom Ber Gansburg, Dr. Howard Rozen, Rabbi Shneur Zalman Gurary, standing, and Dr. Ira Weiss, at the wedding of Rivkah Sternberg (author of this article) and Aaron Slonim.

What was it like for Reb Sholom Ber to stand so close to the flame that he could feel the heat, constantly and consistently?

We will never truly know because Reb Sholom Ber Gansburg never talked. He was simply impervious to all inquiries. He understood the poignancy and weightiness of the words *v'chol adam lo yihiyeh b'ohel moed b'vo'o lechaper bakodesh*. No man shall be present in the Tent of Meeting when he [the *kohen gadol*] comes in to atone in the Holy (*Vayikra* 16:17). Even the *kohen gadol* on Yom Kippur could not actually “be” in the *kodesh hakedashim* (*Midrash Rabba Vayikra* 21:12), and even the loftiest *malachim*, who bear “the face of man,” could not inhabit that holy space (*Talmud Yerushalmi* as cited in the *Maamar V'chol Ha'adam Lo Yihiyeh*, 5723).

Despite his humility, and his distaste for the spotlight, some glimmer of Reb Sholom Ber's profound devotion was known to individuals close to *Bais Harav*. Simply speaking, he never tired of making the lives of the Rebbe and Rebbetzin easier and more comfortable. In this singular quest, he used ways and means that were creative, even ingenious. His dedication was that of a child to parents; perhaps an only child, and a sensitive daughter, at that.

His devotion was reciprocated in astonishing fashion. For all the years that he lived in their home (inclusive of the years when the Rebbe and Rebbetzin moved into the library next door to 770 on Shabbosim and Yamim Tovim and he moved in together with them), he ate every Shabbos and Yom Tov meal with them.

The first Pesach after Reb Sholom Ber had moved into the home of the Rebbe and Rebbetzin, he prepared everything for their *Seder* and then went to his parents' home (located less than a block away) where he quickly conducted his own *Seder* in order to return in time to serve the *Seudah* to the Rebbe and Rebbetzin. To his utter shock, when he returned, he found that the Rebbe and Rebbetzin had been waiting for him and would not begin their *Seder* in his absence. On Sukkos, during the years the Rebbe and Rebbetzin slept in the library, Reb Sholom Ber built a very small *sukkah* for them and never dreamed of intruding on their privacy with his presence. But, again, the Rebbe and Rebbetzin insisted that he join them.

At a *farbrengen* on Simchas Torah 5752 (1991), the Rebbe gave Reb Sholom Ber cake from his platter, and said, “*Alleh mohl derlyngstu mir, itzter vell Ich dir derlyngen*. Usually, you serve me, now I will serve you.”

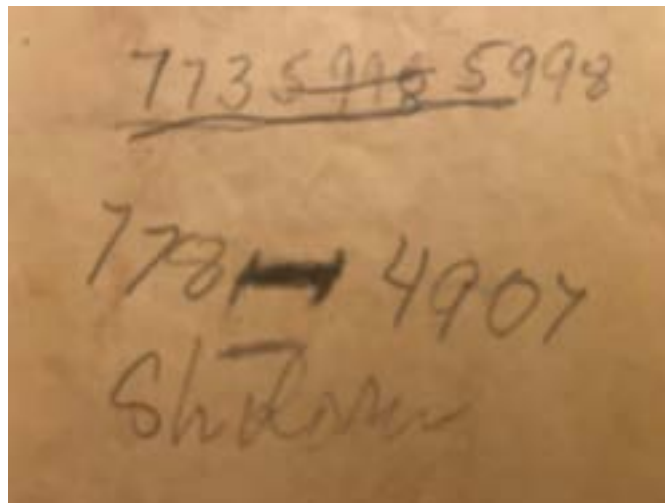
Despite Reb Sholom Ber's proximity to the Rebbe, or perhaps because of it, his deep *bitul* and *hiskashrus* never waned; in fact, it grew with each passing day. He never missed an opportunity to receive a dollar or a *kuntres* from the Rebbe, and the Rebbe never failed to give him double of what was handed to everyone else. This is a fact many people witnessed. Behind closed doors, Reb Sholom Ber aided the Rebbe before and after Chof Zayin Adar of 1992 in ways too numerous to catalogue, but not once did he approach the Rebbe's *daled amos* without first donning his *gartel*.

On Simchas Torah 5728, the Rebbe spoke about the Alter Rebbe's role as *meshores* to the Maggid, and how it was specifically in this capacity that the Alter Rebbe merited to see the Baal Shem Tov, years after he had left this world, *b'hakitz*, fully conscious, and not in a vision. *Gadol shimusha shel Torah yoser melamuda* (*Brachos* 7b). There is a superlative quality to serving a *tzadik* that eclipses what can be gained even from studying the *tzadik*'s teachings. To study is to learn about; to serve is to experience essence. We know that the Rebbe trusted Reb Sholom Ber to be his agent for the purpose of *bedikas chametz*, and that for ten years he said *V'yiten Lecha* with the Rebbe every Motzoei Shabbos. Who knows what else Reb Sholom Ber merited to see and feel in his private and unprecedented role?

We are all more than ready to welcome the Rebbe *da lematah, neshamah beguf*, and we know, because the Rebbe told him so, that Reb Sholom Ber will be with him.

Perhaps then we will be afforded the opportunity to repay the deep debt of gratitude that each person who benefited from the Rebbe—and who did not?—owes to the loving, humble, and faithful *meshores* of our Rebbe, Reb Sholom Ber.

Reb Sholom Ber Gansburg passed away one year ago on 17 Cheshvan 5784. *Yehi zichro baruch*. ❧



In the early '80s, the Rebbetzin wrote Reb Sholom Ber Gansburg's name and telephone number along with his parents' telephone number on a piece of paper she kept handy.

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