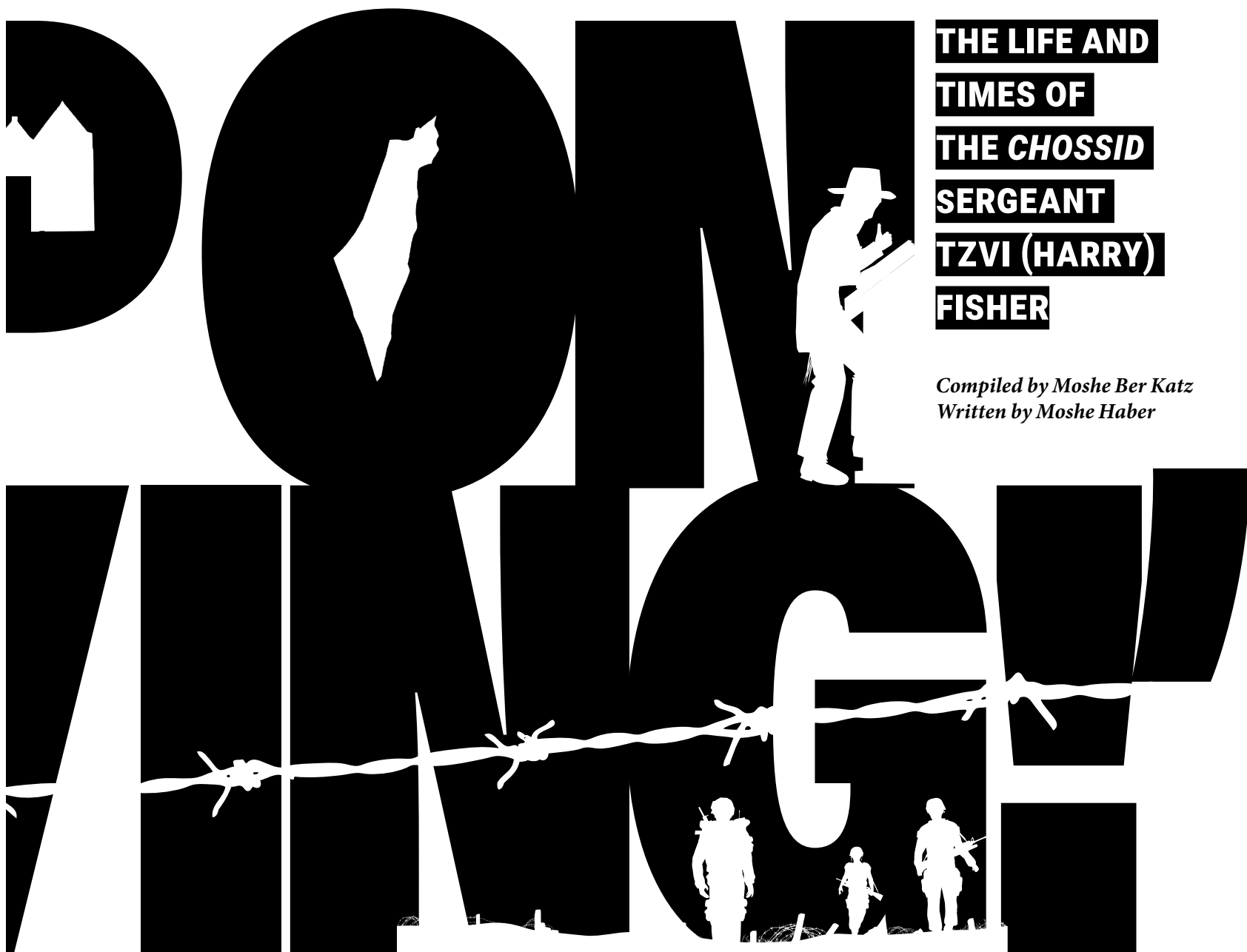
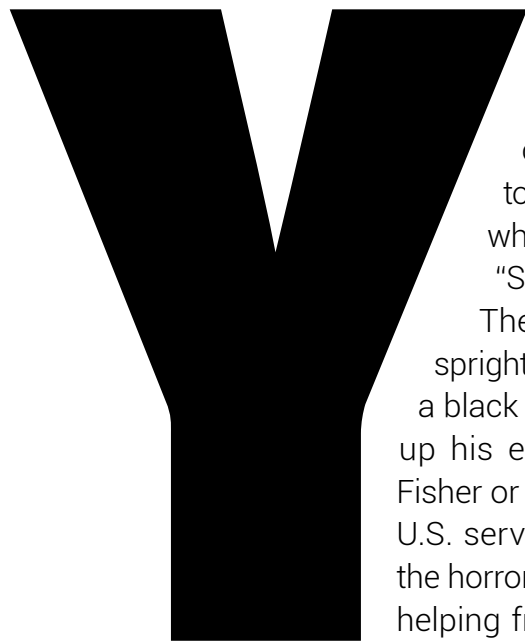


KEEP DRIVING



**THE LIFE AND
TIMES OF
THE *CHOSSID*
SERGEANT
TZVI (HARRY)
FISHER**

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Jerusalem, the eternal city. A tour bus pulls up in the square before the Western Wall. The tourists alight one by one, slowly making their way to this holy site, unsure of what to do or what to say. Suddenly a voice rings out: "Sarge, we have visitors!"

The bewildered tourists turn to see a sprightly old man in a suit and tie sporting a black fedora hat, his broad smile lighting up his entire face. Sergeant Tzvi (Harry) Fisher or Sarge for short was one of the first U.S. servicemen in World War II to witness the horrors of the concentration camps. After helping free Europe of Nazi occupation, he translated his experiences into an intriguing philosophy of life, as he embarked on a journey of self-discovery and a search for truth.

Sarge's motto and oft-spoken phrase was "KEEP ON DRIVING!" alluding to something he learned during his time in the army during World War II. He served under General George Patton, and he admired him because he was always "out front." Patton's own bravery and commitment set the example for what he demanded from the men under his command—in other words, he was always driving them forward, as he drove himself. And so, at the age of 95, Sarge was still living his life as he had on the battlefield, always moving, advancing from strength to strength in his unwavering quest to live his life in the most meaningful way.

SARGE WAS BORN IN 1913 IN A

small town in New Jersey to Russian Jewish immigrants. At the age of 13, like most Jewish boys, he celebrated his bar mitzvah and began putting on *tefillin*. Alas, like too many young Jewish boys, it didn't last long.

Fourteen years later, however, he experienced a sudden "soul awakening" that he could never explain. It prompted him to seek out the only religious person he knew, the local *shochet*, and he asked him to teach him about Yiddishkeit. They began to learn the laws of Shabbos together and were progressing nicely, but then they were rudely interrupted by what then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt called the "Day of Infamy." The Japanese bombed the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, propelling the United States into World War II. Sarge joined the army and off he went, taking his *tefillin* with him. Unfortunately, they were lost after a few months.

THE WAR YEARS

By 1943, when he was 30, Sarge was promoted to the rank of Sergeant. Soon after, he was assigned to General Patton's 3rd Army, 65th division. The 65th eventually made the furthest penetration into Germany of any unit on the western front, driving 850 miles from Le Havre, France, into Austria in the space of a few short months. By now Sarge had 110 men

under his command, all from different backgrounds. To command their respect, he had to set a tough example. To accomplish this, he tried to emulate General Patton.

In March, the order came. They started driving into Germany. The fighting was fierce, but eventually Patton's army got the upper hand. The Germans began retreating as the Americans drove relentlessly deeper and deeper into Germany. It was not long until they reached the Rhine River, one of the primary economic lifelines of the country. They continued driving eastward until they became the closest Allied unit to Berlin. Just then, however, General Dwight D. Eisenhower opted to leave Berlin to the Russians who were moving westward, and Sarge's unit turned south. For several weeks they continued, capturing village after village. By now, after all they had been through, they considered themselves battle-hardened veterans. But then they came to Ohrdruf and received the shock of their lives.

OHRDRUF

The Ohrdruf camp was a subcamp of the Buchenwald concentration camp, and the first Nazi camp to be liberated by U.S. troops. Ohrdruf contained a quarry and an unfinished secret underground hideout for Hitler. At liberation, some prisoners were still alive. The soldiers

passed through two gigantic iron gates, each 40 feet high. The camp was surrounded by two barbed wire fences a foot apart. The reports of what they saw next were so unbelievable that General Eisenhower, together with high-ranking officers, visited Ohrdruf to see with their own eyes what their ears could not comprehend. As they stood there in utter disbelief and horror, the sights they saw prompted General Eisenhower to write these famous words in his letter to Army Chief of Staff, General George Marshall: "The things I saw beggar description."

Eisenhower expressed his fear that one day the horrors might be dismissed as propaganda. In response, he ordered that all civilian news media and military combat camera units, as well as many of his men, be required to visit the camp, witness the scene, and record their observations in print, photographs, and film. Sarge was one of those men.

Slain bodies lay all over the ground in the courtyard. These were the ones too weak to join the death march arranged to evacuate the camp as the Allied armies approached. The fleeing guards had heard the gunfire and had no time to dispose of the bodies. Evidence of Nazi brutality was there for all to see.

In the middle of the courtyard were high wooden gallows with a steel cable hanging from it. The survivors told their liberators that prisoners were often hanged with piano wire. The



macabre tour included a chilling walk-around. Sarge stopped at a shed and was overcome with shock at what he saw. "There were four piles of dead bodies, stacked together with heads next to feet. I could not count them. I was not able to stand there for long, the sight was so dreadful. The bodies were covered with lime, ready for transport to a pit in the nearby forest where thousands of others had been buried in the last few months."

Civilians, including the mayor of the town, were marched out of their homes and forced to look at what was done on their doorstep. When the mayor and his wife returned home that night, after spending the day as eyewitnesses, they both killed themselves.

After the visit by the generals, the first thing the soldiers did was bury the

bodies of the dead. German civilians from the town were taken out and ordered to dig graves. They were made to exhume the bodies in the mass grave and bury them again in individual graves. Sarge supervised. Sarge's anger toward the German people knew no bounds as he supervised the digging of the graves. Nothing is as powerful as seeing and he was witnessing first-hand the work of the bestial Nazis which these townspeople had not just allowed but supported.

What he had seen would haunt him for the rest of his life.

HOMECOMING

Sarge was the only one of four brothers and four sisters who fought in World War II. His homecoming was joyous. Once the excitement had subsided, he began

to reflect on all that he had been through. He said, "I saw Divine Providence every step of the way, but it was only when I left the army that I came to realize I had merited miracle after miracle."

The spiritual awakening that Sarge had begun to experience before his army service then began to redevelop with a passion. He put on *tefillin* every day, observed the laws of *kashrus*, kept Shabbos, and changed his name from Harry to Tzvi. He was working in his family's business, but as he became more religious, he began to seek out other places to live where there were more Jews. Eventually he found his way to Baltimore.

OUTREACH IN ALL ITS FORMS

Baltimore had a thriving Jewish community which dated back to 1840. The Ner Yisroel *cheder* served the Lithuanian community while the Hungarian *chassidim* ran a *cheder* aptly named She'erit Hapleita, which means those who survived, for most of the members of the Hungarian community were indeed Holocaust survivors.

Tzvi's objective was to live the life of a simple Jew, praying in the local synagogue, learning Torah, and keeping the *mitzvos*. However, it was not long after his arrival that he encountered Chabad, an experience that would change his life forever.

When a position became vacant at the She'erit Hapleita *cheder* in Baltimore, the directors approached Chabad in their search for a suitable teacher. Rabbi Yitzchak Springer, young and charismatic, was selected and hired. The school had a synagogue on its premises and Rabbi Springer began reaching out to unaffiliated Jews in the community, attracting worshippers like a magnet due to his warmth and sincerity. Tzvi became a regular participant in the services, drawn to Rabbi Springer's kind and gentle manner. Soon, Tzvi became a

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JEM photo ID # 20947.

Tzvi, far right, davening Shacharis with the Rebbe on 25 Adar 5737 (March 15, 1977).

partner in his outreach work.

Rabbi Springer did not own a car, so Tzvi would often drive him around, and they would talk. In every conversation Rabbi Springer would encourage Tzvi to visit 770, go to the Rebbe for *yeichidus*, attend a *farbrengen*, watch the Rebbe *daven*. Eventually Tzvi agreed to go with him the next time he went to Crown Heights for a Shabbos.

In 770, Tzvi watched as, between *sichos*, people would raise their cups of wine and say *l'chaim* to the Rebbe, who would acknowledge them with a nod of his head. Tzvi did the same and the Rebbe looked straight at him and smiled. He was hooked. For the next few years, Tzvi never missed a Shabbos Mevorchim

farbrengen, and soon he left Baltimore and moved to Crown Heights to be close to the Rebbe.

Tzvi rented a small basement apartment just two doors away from 770. He lived there for 22 years, from 1958-1980. One day he was standing on a bench at a *farbrengen* to get a better view, and he felt the Rebbe was telling him to come down and stand behind him, so he did. From then on, he always stood behind the Rebbe, together with the Rebbe's secretaries, Rabbi Leibel Groner and Rabbi Binyomin Klein. No matter how late the *farbrengens* lasted, he never sat down out of respect for the Rebbe.

Once during *kos shel brachah* after a Yom Tov, Tzvi saw a young hippie

receiving wine from the Rebbe. The young man told the Rebbe, "Rabbi, it's been such a pleasure to be here with you." The Rebbe gave him a wide smile and said, "The next time you come, the pleasure will be all mine." Tzvi was deeply touched by the encounter; in the Rebbe's eyes no one was better than anyone else, whether you sat on the dais or stood among the thousands in the crowd; every Jew was equally important to the Rebbe.

After 22 years in Crown Heights, now in his mid-sixties, Tzvi accepted an offer to work at the Chabad House of Rabbi Isaac Levitansky in S. Monica, California, helping many Jews to experience the richness of their heritage,



Tzvi, top left, clapping along with the Rebbe.

name and their mother's name and write to the Rebbe for *brachos* for them. In the three years that he was there, he sent the Rebbe over 3,000 names.

After the three years in Eretz Yisroel, Tzvi returned to S. Monica. But it was time to see the Rebbe in person again; he traveled to New York and, of course, joined the line for dollars on Sunday. When his time came, the Rebbe momentarily stopped taking dollars, threw up his hands and cried out, "Tzvi! A blessing for Eretz Yisroel!" Tzvi said, "I'm in S. Monica." The Rebbe replied, "So, a blessing for S. Monica, too!"

SHLIACH TO VENICE

Tzvi had two close friends in California who had been telling him about a holiday home they had in Venice, Italy, and how quiet and peaceful it was; they invited him to visit. The place may have been quiet and peaceful, but Tzvi certainly was not. Just sitting around and enjoying the scenery was not his thing.

In Venice, he found the Rebbe's *shliach*, Rabbi Ramy Bannin. Tzvi was astounded; it seemed that Rabbi Ramy worked 24 hours a day running a yeshiva and a restaurant in addition to the Chabad House. Ramy had the only

fully participating in the Rebbe's *mitvza'im* projects.

The following year a friend told him about a special offer on airline tickets to Eretz Yisroel. Tzvi had never been there. A ten-day trip turned into a three-year sojourn—Tzvi loved being in the Holy Land. He went regularly to the Chabad *tefillin* booth at the central bus station in Tel Aviv, as well as to the one at the Kosel, to help put *tefillin* on Jewish boys and men. He would show them a picture of the Rebbe and tell them if they would take upon themselves keeping Shabbos, eating *kosher*, putting on *tefillin*, or any other *mitzvah*, then he would take their





JEM photo ID#2024005.

Tzvi receiving a dollar from the Rebbe's holy hand on 26 Cheshvan 5752 (November 3, 1991).

kosher restaurant in Venice, and on Shabbos he served as many as 200 people free of charge, with meals sponsored by generous donors. When he saw the size of the undertaking, Tzvi rolled up his sleeves and began helping in any way he could, whether in the office or serving in the restaurant. Ramy asked him if he would stay in Venice for a while; Ramy found him suitable accommodations; and his quiet and peaceful vacation turned into an exciting two-year venture.

At the end of those immensely fulfilling two years, Tzvi's soul began to yearn for Eretz Yisroel, and he decided to act on the Rebbe's *brachah* that he had received at dollars two years earlier.

CHOSSID THROUGH AND THROUGH

In 2001, at the age of 88, Tzvi returned to Eretz Yisroel. He joined a *kollel*, learning for several hours a day. In the afternoon, he would go to the Kosel to *daven minchah* and then spend a few hours assisting the *bachurim* who worked at the *tefillin* booth.

Many of them spoke only Hebrew, so when they encountered an English-speaking tourist, Sarge was only too happy to take over. When a busload of Jewish tourists would show up and extra help was needed, they would call out, "Sarge, we have visitors!" The bewildered tourist would look around

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Rabbi Yitzchok Kogan (L), known as "the tzaddik of Leningrad," presented this picture to Sarge as a token of appreciation to him for instituting the idea of putting a note with the Ten Commandments into food packages for the poor.

for a soldier clad in an army uniform but instead would be surprised to see an elderly man in classic Lubavitcher garb. "Have you ever heard of General Patton?" Tzvi invariably asked. "Sure," the tourist would say, and conversation would flow from there.

Tzvi never forgot the time he put *tefillin* on a man who was 88 years old and had never done this *mitzvah*. As a child he had a brother who lost his life to diphtheria, and in the aftermath of the tragedy this man's bar mitzvah had been canceled.

A Jewish tourist from Minnesota explained that he had at last fulfilled his childhood dream to visit the Western Wall. He had been told of its holiness, but not about the holiness of his religion; he knew nothing about it. After he donned *tefillin*, Tzvi told him, "Don't think you're finished, my friend. Today was just the beginning. You came here to experience holiness and you have and you will. G-d sent you here for a purpose!"

Someone once asked Tzvi if his admiration for the Rebbe stemmed from his association with General Patton; if because he was trained to

follow orders, it was natural for him to switch leaders when he discovered another "general" he could respect.

Tzvi reacted by unsuccessfully trying to contain his indignation. His face changed color, he shut his eyes tightly, shook his head emphatically, and yelled, "YOU CANNOT COMPARE THE REBBE TO ANYONE!"

From where did he get the energy to do all that he managed to accomplish? He answered that he was at a *farbrengen* when the Rebbe explained that if the Bais Hamikdash is not rebuilt in a person's lifetime, it is as though it had been destroyed in his lifetime.

On the 12th of Tammuz 5744 (July 12, 1984), the Rebbe told us, "*KER A VELT HEINT!*" (TURN OVER THE WORLD TODAY!)

"The words tore me to pieces," he said. "From that moment I took it upon myself to do my part and not stop until I see the third Bais Hamikdash standing in all its glory."

Tzvi explained that everything he did was predicated on two things: willpower and determination. *Ein davar ha'omed bifnei haratzon*, he said; nothing stands in the way of willpower.

Tzvi said, "One of the greatest gifts we have is willpower. Everyone is endowed with it, but we don't always use it to the fullest. We must make the most of this gift, bring it to the fore and then just *keep on driving!*"

Sergeant Tzvi Fisher passed away in the Holy Land on the 18th of Nissan 5770 (2010) at the age of 97 and is buried in the Colel Chabad plot on Har Hazeisim.



Tzvi doing what he does best at his bustling *mitvza'im* stand on 13 Tammuz 5768 (July 16, 2008).