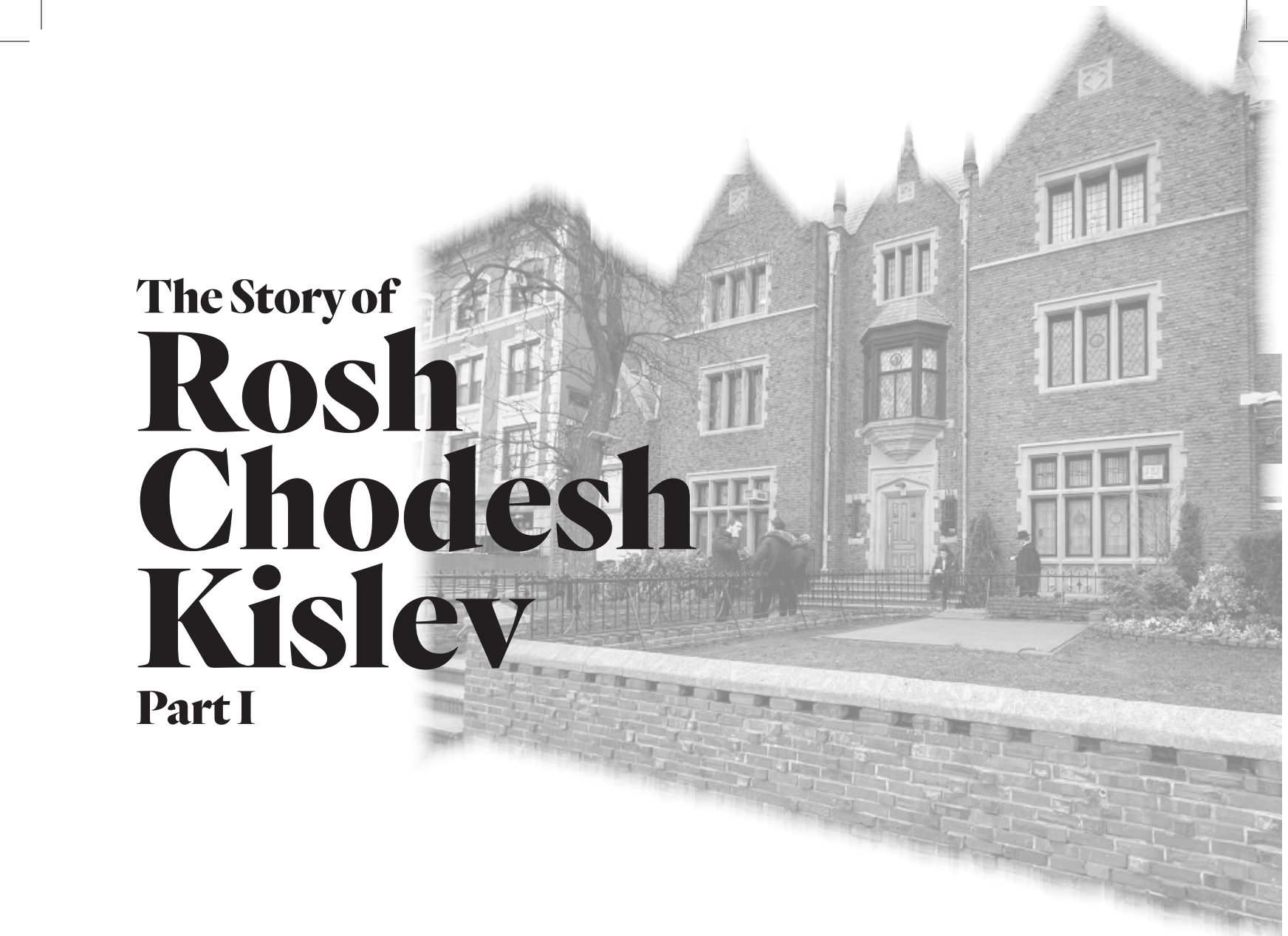




The Story of Rosh Chodesh Kislev

Part I

This two-part feature tells the story of Rosh Chodesh Kislev 5738/1977. Part I is from the perspective of the *chassidim*, based on an article written by M. Schneuri, in Hebrew, for *Kfar Chabad* magazine. It was translated by Rabbi Pesach Burston and Rabbi Mendel Lifshitz for a Rosh Chodesh Kislev event in South Africa in 1997 and published as a booklet by Yeshivas Or Elchanan Chabad of Los Angeles, CA, in 2002. This series was adapted with permission and edited by Sara Gold for the *NCN*. We gratefully thank Dr. Ira Weiss for taking the time to check the manuscript and for making some important corrections and improvements. Part II, which will *b'ezras Hashem* be published in the Kislev *N'shei Chabad Newsletter*, is based on several talks by Dr. Weiss sharing his experiences with the Rebbe.



Seven-Seventy is packed wall to wall. Thousands of *chassidim* from every corner of the earth are here to celebrate with the Rebbe. All eyes focus on the Rebbe as the *hakafos* begin. The Rebbe holds the *Sefer Torah* aloft. His face radiates the sheer joy of Yom Tov as he dances with his brother-in-law, the Rashag [acronym for Reb Shmaryahu Gurary, husband of the Frierdiker Rebbe's eldest daughter, Chana] on the dais in the shul's center. It is Shemini Atzeres 5738/1977.

The first *hakafah* ends. The Rebbe walks, slowly, back to his place at the southeastern wall. The second and third *hakafos* are completed and the Rebbe, looking tired, has clapped his hands only a few times.

The fourth *hakafah* is about to begin. The Rebbe turns to face the crowd. The singing stops. Silence engulfs 770. The Rebbe's face is as white as chalk. The Rebbe strains to bring his hands together to clap. He asks for a chair and sits down.

A shudder ripples through the crowd. *Hakafos* is the liveliest time of year. The Rebbe never sits during *hakafos*. Now, the Rebbe leans forward in his chair and closes his eyes.

There is shouting. "Water!" "Air!" "Everybody out!"

Windows are broken, doors are knocked down, every possible exit in sight becomes an escape route for the *chassidim* in order for the Rebbe to have air. *Chassidim* stream into the adjoining courtyard. Within minutes, 770 is empty. Of the thousands singing and dancing a moment ago, less than 100 remain inside.

Doctors rush to the front, afraid and concerned. The Rebbe smiles and says that everything is fine. He is only tired; no one should be concerned. "Drink," the Rebbe's aides beg. "No," says the Rebbe, "I will not drink outside the *sukkah*. Continue with the *hakafos*." At that stage, who could have imagined that the Rebbe had just suffered a serious heart attack?

The fifth and sixth *hakafos* are quickly finished. The seventh *hakafah* traditionally belongs to the Rebbe and tonight will be no different. Despite everything, the Rebbe dances with the Rashag. The Rebbe smiles as the Rashag ends the *hakafah* early.

After *davening*, the Rebbe wishes the *chassidim* the customary "*Gut Yom Tov!*" and walks slowly out of shul, up the stairs to his room, where he shuts the door behind him. Only Hashem knows what the night has in store.



Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky and his sons receive *kos shel brachah* from the Rebbe on Motzoei Rosh Hashanah 5737. JEM Photo ID#204066.

THE ONE WHO STAYED CALM

Today, we all know the happy ending to this story. We know the miracles that led to Rosh Chodesh Kislev 38 days later, the day that the Rebbe returned home, signifying his complete recovery.

During those critical days of Tishrei 5738, the world of Lubavitch and beyond was in turmoil. The one person who remained calm was the Rebbe himself.

The moment the Rebbe's complexion changed, doctors who were in 770 rushed to his side. In the ensuing days, many more specialists and experts joined them. These experienced men all expressed wonder at the Rebbe's superhuman conduct throughout the ordeal.

In the throes of a serious heart attack, the Rebbe did not cry out in pain. Not a sigh escaped his lips. The Rebbe himself walked from downstairs in 770 to his room upstairs. The Rebbe insisted on keeping all the *mitzvos*—not even giving up the making of *kiddush* that same night. The following are accounts of the doctors and *chassidim* present, their encounters and discussions with the Rebbe.

Shortly after his heart attack, the Rebbe headed to the *sukkah* for his Yom Tov meal. The doctors strongly opposed this move since they felt the Rebbe should not walk around. The Rebbe would not hear of this. "How can I leave the Rebbetzin waiting for *kiddush*?" In

the *sukkah*, the Rebbe discovered a bottle of grape juice on the table. "*Kiddush* is made on wine, not grape juice," the Rebbe insisted.

Within the early hours after the heart attack, doctors urged the Rebbe to go to the hospital. The Rebbe firmly refused.

"What would one do if one was in a place where there are no hospitals?" the Rebbe asked. "Whatever would be done in that situation should be done now."

A woman, who had previously assisted the Frierdiker Rebbe, asked the Rebbe's permission to ask him a question. The Rebbe nodded affirmatively.

"If someone else was in the Rebbe's predicament, and asked the Rebbe if they should go to the



Rabbi Leibel Bistrizky receives *kos shel brachah* from the Rebbe on Motzoei Rosh Hashanah 5737. JEM Photo ID#203954.

hospital, what would the Rebbe advise them?"

"Would this person listen to me?" the Rebbe asked.

"Yes."

"So I should be obeyed now as well," the Rebbe concluded.

Several Rabbis approached the Rebbe and urged him to go to the hospital. The Rebbe replied to them, "I am an observant Jew and, hence, must listen to the opinion of the Rabbis. Therefore, if the decision is that I should go, please do not tell me for then I would have to do so although there is no need."

In the early hours of the morning, the Rabbis returned to the Rebbe with the same plea.

The Rebbe was adamant. "I have expressed my opinion yesterday

and will not change it."

The doctors discussed the problem among themselves. One of them approached the Rebbe's bedside and said, "Rabbi, if you do not agree to be transferred to a hospital, we will leave immediately and free ourselves of any responsibility. We are experienced doctors and tell you that you are placing your life in danger. If you do not agree to go, we cannot take responsibility for your life."

At 2:00 a.m., the doctors donned their coats and left the room. Only a few hours after a serious heart attack, the Rebbe was left without medical care.

But the Rebbe's secretaries did not sit idly. As Mrs. Esther Sternberg wrote in the *N'shei*

Chabad Newsletter (Tishrei 2021), "At the time there was a hospital called Brooklyn Jewish, a few blocks north of Eastern Parkway near Franklin Avenue. Dr. Robert Richter, a surgeon who came to 770 to attend to the Rebbe, said to Rabbi Leibel Bistrizky, 'Come with me to the hospital. Let's see if we can find a spare monitor.'

"They went to the cardiac floor, saw an unused monitor on wheels and wheeled it out of the hospital. They figured they would borrow it for a while and bring it back when it was no longer needed. Nobody stopped them, so they brought the machine to 770 and were able to set up an ICU within an hour."

At five o'clock that morning, the



Dr. Ira Weiss receives *Lekach* from the Rebbe on 21 Tishrei 5749. JEM Photo ID#256694.

ECG registered a second, more severe heart attack.

LISTENING TO THE AKERES HABAYIS

In the magazine *A Chassidishe Derher* of Kislev 5777, Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky speaks about this critical stage. “I was pacing back and forth pondering what to do when I heard the Rebbetzin’s voice. ‘Rabbi Krinsky,’ she said, ‘you know so many people. Can’t you find a doctor for my husband?’”

Dr. Ira Weiss told the *N’shei Chabad Newsletter*:

“In his desperation to find a doctor who might help, Rabbi Krinsky thought of me only because of a very close connection that I had with his brother-in-law, Rabbi Herschel Shusterman, who, with Rabbi Krinsky’s sister, Rebbetzin Chava Shusterman,

were my beloved Cheder teachers at their shul, Congregation Agudas Chabad, throughout my childhood in Chicago. Four years earlier, in 1973, when I wrote a well-received cardiology text on the interpretation of complex heart rhythm abnormalities, I sent a courtesy copy to Rabbi Shusterman as an acknowledgment of his inspiring guidance. Rabbi Shusterman then forwarded my book to Rabbi Krinsky to present it to the Lubavitcher Rebbe. (Little did I know that the Rebbe would keep my book near him in his study for all the years that ensued.)

“When Rabbi Krinsky called for help, the Rebbe’s blood pressure and cardiac pump function had declined to critically low levels. In addition, I recognized that door-to-door travel from my home to 770 Eastern Parkway would

require at least four hours, way too long a delay for the Rebbe’s timely cardiac needs, not to mention the time that would be needed to acquire and set up cardiac monitoring equipment and cardiac medication infusions, etc., in a city where I had no professional contacts and no medical licensure.

“Fortunately, a memory flashed into my mind, and I recalled that Dr. Louis Teichholz, one of my very best cardiology mentors in Boston, had recently been recruited from Harvard to head the highly respected cardiology department at Mt. Sinai Medical Center in New York City. I immediately called the general phone number of the Mt. Sinai Medical Center, and, miracle of miracles, the hospital’s switchboard operator immediately recognized the urgency of my call and personally

Dr. Weiss suspected that the Rebbe would ask to go to the Ohel. Anticipating this request, he first asked the Rebbe, “Doesn’t the Rebbe himself instruct his *chassidim* to listen to the doctor?”

walked from her switchboard to Dr. Teichholz, whose office was nearby, to bring him right to the phone. Even though Dr. Teichholz had not previously had contact with Lubavitch, he was aware of the stature of the Rebbe and generously volunteered to help me to the fullest in restoring the Rebbe’s health.

“Hours before my arrival, Dr. Teichholz single-handedly set up a highly functional coronary care unit in the Rebbe’s study and effectively boosted the Rebbe’s cardiac function and blood pressure.

“The Rebbe and Dr. Teichholz became fast friends and remained close with one another over the ensuing years. No physician was more instrumental in saving the Rebbe’s life and restoring the Rebbe’s health than Dr. Teichholz. With the participation of Dr.

Bernard Lown, my cardiology mentor at Harvard; Dr. Lawrence Resnick, cardiovascular researcher at the Cornell Medical Center in New York; and Dr. Robert Feldman, community physician in Crown Heights, we formed a five-man collegial and competent medical team caring for the Rebbe over the ensuing years.”

On arrival at 770, Dr. Weiss was overwhelmed by the very warm welcomes he received from both the Rebbe and the Rebbetzin (who even prepared a small *kiddush* for Shemini Atzeres). He was also overwhelmed by the multitude of miracles that Hashem had delivered that morning to rescue and restore the Rebbe onto a path for recovery.

The Rebbe, Dr. Teichholz, and Dr. Weiss had a wonderful initial meeting together. All agreed that the Rebbe’s level of medical care

and his potential for a full recovery were greatly increased by his being at 770 rather than in a standard hospital. Only at 770 (but not at a standard hospital) could the Rebbe participate directly and daily in decision-making with the attending physicians. Only at 770 (but not at a standard hospital) could the Rebbe be assured that only the attending physician (and not an on-call substitute or medical assistant) would be providing care. Only at 770 (but not at a standard hospital) would the Rebbe be comforted by hearing the singing and prayers of his community. Only at 770 (but not at a standard hospital) would the Rebbe have “tele-monitoring” (a newly developed technology at that time) which permits cardiac monitoring without being restrained by burdensome cables connected to a cardiac monitor.

The doctors protested that the noise would disturb the Rebbe. The Rebbe responded, “The sound of Torah doesn’t disturb.”

THE OHEL

On Erev Rosh Chodesh and the 15th of every month, as well as on other special occasions, the Rebbe would visit the Ohel. On the Sunday following Yom Tov, the Rebbe inquired of the doctors if they would permit him to visit the Ohel on Tuesday, Erev Rosh Chodesh.

Dr. Weiss suspected that the Rebbe would ask to go to the Ohel. Anticipating this request, he first asked the Rebbe, “Doesn’t the Rebbe himself instruct his *chassidim* to listen to the doctor?”

The Rebbe responded with a question. “Are you a *chossid*?”

“What is the difference?” replied Dr. Weiss.

“A *chossid* must obey...”

However, the Rebbe did not go to the Ohel because the Rebbetzin did not want him to go.

That Tuesday, the doctors asked the Rebbe how he felt. The Rebbe answered, “Physically, I feel fine, *baruch Hashem*, but mentally, not so well.”

It seemed that it was because

the Rebbe did not visit the Ohel that day.

One of the doctors explained to the Rebbe, “You must watch your health. If you don’t, there is, *chas v’shalom*, a 25 percent chance of a relapse.”

The doctor proceeded to ask the Rebbe whether he had understood.

“Certainly,” responded the Rebbe with a smile. “You said that even if I don’t take care of my health—which I assure you, I will—there is a 75 percent chance that the illness will not recur.”

‘MIT AH SHTUREM!’

On Yom Tov, a doctor arrived from Cleveland. He asked the Rebbe whether he had desecrated Yom Tov by coming as there were already many other doctors present.

The Rebbe answered, “This is similar to the laws of *kiddush hachodesh*. We tell the witnesses to come to Yerushalayim, and desecrate Shabbos and Yom Tov to get there, even though their testimony may not be accepted. Because if they wouldn’t come

there would be no witnesses and we wouldn’t know when the new month begins.

“Similarly,” continued the Rebbe, “to heal a Jew, one desecrates Shabbos even when one is unsure.”

It was clear to everyone present that the Rebbe was making a clear and strong campaign to keep the spirits of the *chassidim* high, and not to detract from the joy of Yom Tov.

On Shemini Atzeres afternoon, the Rebbe sent a message to the *chassidim*, “Don’t forget to make Yidden happy in various *shuls*. Go there with a *shturem*!”

“*Maariv* and *hakafos* should be with the greatest joy, and—most importantly—with a *shturem*!”

The Rebbe announced that those who wished to aid his recovery should rejoice.

That afternoon, Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Kazarnovsky entered the Rebbe’s room and tearfully wished him a complete and speedy recovery.

The Rebbe chided him, “You

act contrary to our Torah, which teaches, 'Rejoice in your festivals.' We want me to become healthier, and we will achieve that through an increase in *simchah*. Crying is against my wishes."

The Rebbe then gave him two bottles of vodka and instructed him, "Distribute these during the pre-*hakafos farbrengen*. I am sure they will organize such a *farbrengen* and I am sure it will not lack words of Torah, encouragement, and joy. They should then conduct joyous *hakafos* without detracting from the joy of Yom Tov."

On the eve of Simchas Torah, the Rebbe asked one of his secretaries if he had participated in being *mesame'ach* in other shuls. He answered affirmatively, and the Rebbe asked, "With a *shturem*?"

The Rebbe then asked what was happening downstairs in the main shul. The secretary replied that a *farbrengen* had been scheduled for 9:00 p.m. "With a *shturem*?" the Rebbe wanted to know. "Tell them that it should be conducted with a great *shturem*!"

The *hakafos* that night were so lively, you could hear the singing and dancing in the Rebbe's room. When the Rebbe heard them singing, "*Der Rebbe iz gezunt!*" (the Rebbe is healthy!) he smiled broadly and exclaimed, "*This is what chassidim are!*"

People asked the Rebbe if the singing downstairs disturbed him. The Rebbe replied, "*Es iz a geshmaker muzik—it is delightful music!*"

Later that night, the Rebbe said to inform the *chassidim* that

as much as they had danced that night with a big *shturem*, the next day they should dance with an even greater *shturem*!

On the evening following Simchas Torah, several older *chassidim* visited the Rebbe in his room and beseeched him not to overburden himself with *yechidus* and other obligations.

The Rebbe promptly replied, "To bring Moshiach is even harder [than fulfilling those obligations]."

On Motzoei Simchas Torah, the crowd was told that the Rebbe would say a *sichah* from a microphone installed in his room. Doctors' orders were for the *sichah* to last no more than five minutes. At 12:00 a.m. the Rebbe began; at 12:22 the Rebbe concluded. Later, the doctors asked the Rebbe if he had sufficient time to say all he wanted. The Rebbe replied, "If it were up to me, there would be no limit to the amount of time I would speak."

On Motzoei Shabbos Parshas Bereishis, the Rebbe spoke for close to an hour. The doctors had given permission for 20 minutes.

Every day *bachurim* were going to the Ohel to *daven* for the Rebbe. Many *shluchim* and *bachurim* did special things in the Rebbe's *zchus* for a *refuah sheleimah*. One *shliach* gave every Jewish girl in his city a candlestick. When the Rebbe heard about it, he stood up and smiled.

THE MAN TO WHOM THE MAIL WAS IMPORTANT

On Thursday, 24 Tishrei, the Rebbe asked for the mail that had arrived over the past few days. One of the doctors suggested that the Rebbe

rest for about two weeks before beginning to reply to mail.

The Rebbe countered, "Is the Jew who writes to me now any less deserving of help than the one who will write in a few days? And besides, if I wait two weeks, the workload will be much greater."

"Perhaps," one doctor ventured, "one of the secretaries can read the letters, present the Rebbe with a general outline of its contents, and the Rebbe will respond accordingly."

"That," the Rebbe responded, "is like a doctor who, rather than examining a patient, hears a general report from a second person. Would that suffice for the doctor?"

A week later, on the first of Cheshvan, the Rebbe sent a message for the *bachurim* to return to the *beis medrash* upstairs to learn. The doctors protested that the noise would disturb the Rebbe. The Rebbe responded, "The sound of Torah doesn't disturb."

On the 19th of Cheshvan, the Rebbe sent out a letter to all the *chassidim*. It read: "Thank you for your *brachos* for my *gezunt*. With the help of Hashem and in the merit of all your prayers, my situation is much better, and *baruch Hashem* I am returning to my work."

Rabbi Nissan Mindel came into the Rebbe's room. The Rebbe wished him *mazal tov* for his grandson's bris. When the Rebbe asked for the baby's name, Rabbi Mindel told the Rebbe that he was named for the Rebbe's teacher, Reb Schneur Zalman Vilenkin. The Rebbe was very happy and spoke about his teacher for a while.



The Rashag receives a dollar from the Rebbe on 7 Iyar 5748. JEM Photo ID#160247.

THE REBBE GOES HOME

On Thursday evening, Aleph Kislev, a large crowd of *chassidim* gathered outside the entrance of 770, waiting to see the Rebbe come out. The Rebbe was going to his home on President Street for the first time in five weeks—since Shemini Atzeres night. As the Rebbe exited 770, the crowd burst into joyous song and dance. The Rebbe encouraged the singing with his hands as he walked to the car.

Within a few minutes, the news had spread throughout the world. The hearts of *chassidim* were filled with rejoicing as they wished *l'chaim* to one another.

It took some time until everything returned to normal. Until Pesach, the Rebbe only came down to shul on Shabbos for *krias haTorah*. The first *farbrengen* with the Rebbe downstairs was Yud Tes Kislev; it was another *simchah* for the *chassidim*. *Bachurim* *farbrenged* for days afterward. The Rebbe went to the Ohel for the first time on Erev Rosh Chodesh Teves. During this time, doctors were always with the Rebbe. There was a monitor checking the Rebbe's heart. Only before Shavuot did the Rebbe *farbreng* downstairs on Shabbos afternoon. It was a full year later, on Shabbos Bereishis

Mevarchim Cheshvan 5739/1978, that the Rebbe came downstairs for *Tehillim*.

In the following years, *chassidim* established the day of Rosh Chodesh Kislev as a day to rejoice and *farbreng*, to praise and thank Hashem for the great miracle He did for us—giving us more precious years with our Rebbe *b'gashmius*. May we be *zocheh* to celebrate Rosh Chodesh Kislev together with the Rebbe in 770 very soon! ❧

DR. IRA WEISS speaks about his experiences in Part II of “The Story of Rosh Chodesh Kislev,” which will *bézzras Hashem* appear in the upcoming Kislev issue of the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter*.