■ *Chana Shloush*

Farbrengens ARE FOR EVERYONE

*F*arbrengen literally means get-together. It is called this name so the Evil Inclination will be fooled into thinking that this is just like any other get-together; thus, it will not be on guard. It will not try to influence the participants to miss the potential for inspiration in the gathering.

> *The Alter Rebbe related, "A note fell down from the Heavens containing the following: 'What a Chassidishe farbrengen can achieve, even the angel Michoel cannot achieve...'" This power stems from the fact that when G-d, regarded as our Father, sees that His children are sitting together in unity and love, He is then aroused with a desire to fulfill all their requests, even those of which they would not be worthy via normal means, such as via the advocacy of Michoel, the defending angel of the Jewish people. Indeed, Chassidic tradition includes many stories of people who were saved by taking part in a farbrengen and being thereby blessed (Free translation of Igros Kodesh, Frierdiker Rebbe, Volume 3, p. 413).*

There is a Chabad Chassidic saying, "When two Jews get together to talk of their spiritual failings, this comprises two G-dly souls vs. one animal soul." The reasoning is that the G-dly souls are selfless and are more than happy to unite and help each other in the spiritual failing at hand. However, the animal soul is innately selfish, and thus each animal soul will refuse to join forces with the other. Thus, at a farbrengen, when chassidim get together to inspire one another, they have the help of each other's G-dly souls, greatly outnumbering the animal souls.

If the accomplishments of a chassidishe farbrengen are this powerful, why don't we women farbreng more? A major reason, I've heard, is that many women simply don't know how to create a farbrengen that will be meaningful for themselves and their group of friends. They have lots of preconceived notions. Perhaps they think of farbrengens as something the men do, or that they did long ago in school. They may believe they're "not the type" to participate in a farbrengen. Or they think they might be embarrassed, chas v'sholom, by what they share at a farbrengen. In this article we present some insights, tools, ideas and practical suggestions in order that you – yes, *you*: no matter who you are! – can make farbrengens happen. You and your chevrah can tap into the tremendous power of a farbrengen.

Where did the concept of farbrengen originate? According to the authors of "Chitas for Kids," a wonderful daily email for kids (and adults), Moshe Rabbeinu farbrenged with the Yidden in Chumash Devarim, exhorting them on how to live and serve Hashem. (To sign up, email them at info@kidschitas.org.) If that's the case, then farbrengens truly *are* for everyone! So let's start planning now!



There are essentially three different formats for farbrengens:

a) The first type will not happen again until Moshiach is revealed and we experience the return of our loved ones b'guf, and the Rebbe himself leads a massive, euphoric farbrengen – may we experience it immediately.

b) A mashpia, community leader or other respected person leads the farbrengen. The speaker's role is to educate and transmit a message to the participants. Lubavitcher girls and women are most familiar with this type of farbrengen from high school, seminary and N'shei Chabad functions. You can creatively tailor this format to include other types of speakers, as well. The speaker doesn't necessarily have to be learned. Try inviting an older woman to speak to your group, especially to discuss her life experiences, her conversations or correspondence with the Rebbe and/or the hashgachah pratis she has seen in the course of her life. I have attended two unforgettable farbrengens of this nature. At one, Mrs. Riva Geisinsky a"h shared stories of her life one summer afternoon as we relaxed on lounge chairs in the bungalow colony. At the other, during my friend's birthday farbrengen Mrs. Sophie Garfinkel shetichye described many of her rich life experiences.

c) For our generation, this third type of farbrengen has fantastic unleashed potential: A group of chassidim gather to discuss matters of divine service – that is, matters that touch them deeply and profoundly – in an intimate, individualized, informal way. Either there is no main speaker, or else, following the speaker's words of Torah or inspiration, there is a farbrengen in which members of the group are the speakers. Here are some tips on how to make this type of farbrengen work for you:

Pick an occasion

A birthday is the perfect opportunity to farbreng. A yahrtzeit is also a suitable time. If your group is made up of grandmother-age women, however, all of you need to be careful not to make your friends feel obliged to attend a yahrtzeit farbrengen every few weeks. A chassidishe *yoma d'pagra* is always a good time for a farbrengen. Although it is eight months away as of now, the month of Elul is an excellent choice because we are all involved in teshuvah and can truly help to inspire one another and give each other a balanced sense of perspective. Other holiday times are worthwhile, as long as people can fit the event into their busy schedules. Rosh Chodesh lends itself well to farbrengens. Any time period the Rebbe has designated as a time for farbrengens, or whenever you feel the need for a lift, is a perfect time for a farbrengen.

And if you go away to the mountains in the summer, don't miss the tremendous opportunity to farbreng in a relaxed outdoor atmosphere, and to invite special guest speakers. People can co-host a farbrengen as well, especially when several women have birthdays in the same month. You can plan a farbrengen any time you feel a need for some inspiration.

Plan your group

You need a group of like-minded women you feel comfortable with and want to share with, bond with and learn from. If you're going to let your hair down in front of others, you don't want to have feelings of regret and embarrassment later, thinking, "Oh my goodness, I said that in front of *her*?!" Farbrengens can work great wonders for your group whether you're baalei teshuvah in Timbuktu, girls straight out of Sem in London, middle-aged cousins (you might be more comfortable with family than with friends), Russian-born great-grandmothers, young mothers with babies in Melbourne, or a female Jewish motorcycle gang traveling cross-country. If you're a Shlucha in Yehupits, try a phone hookup or Skype farbrengen. I was told, in the name of Rabbi Asher Crispe, that neshamos sometimes move in groups from one gilgul to another. Maybe this explains why we feel so close to a particular group of friends: Hashem has in mind that we will be making a particular tikkun during our lives with these specific Jews.

... no one is allowed to repeat what someone said during the farbrengen outside the group without that person's permission.

There is no rule about the size of a farbrengen. It need not be larger than six people. Psychological studies have determined that around seven is the perfect number for people to feel comfortable sharing. Some people feel it's more exciting when there are ten. In addition, the Rebbe has spoken often about the importance of doing mitzvos in groups of ten. (It is written that when ten Jews gather together and a malach is passing overhead, it's burnt to a crisp because of their koach!) Three could make a nice farbrengen, as could two. So could 25, in case you're opening it up to a larger group beyond very good friends. (You might ask every person you invite to bring a like-minded friend.) Each size will produce a different kind of farbrengen. Invite guests by phone, email or in person.

Pick a topic

Once you have decided upon the group and occasion, think of a topic that excites or intrigues you. Most likely, it will be an issue that others, too, are dealing with in their personal lives. The topic might be spiritual and can be related to the parshah or the time of year. Or maybe it won't sound spiritual at all. The topic at an annual Tishrei birthday party is "What Did You Learn This Year?" At yahrtzeit farbrengens, a group of fifty-somethings discussed "Mothers," "Fathers" (there were lots of amazing, touching and funny stories from the family tree), and "Wisdom From My Mother's Table." At one marvelous birthday farbrengen, the hostess asked every participant to "Bring Something to Share." This brought an amazing array of creative contributions, and the sense of bonding that evening was epic. You can spin off from an evocative topic like "The Way We Were," "The Long Way Home," "Beyond Perfection," "Embracing Life," or "Mystery." (These are chapter titles gleaned from a Jack Canfield book.)

Of course, the theme of "True Freedom" lends itself well to Erev Pesach, Yud-Tes Kislev or Yud-Beis Tammuz farbrengens. "Inner Growth" applies at Tu B'Shvat or any time. "Chanukah: Victory of Inner Light Over Darkness" is another idea. "Returning to the True Self" is an obvious choice for Elul/Tishrei and beyond. "Increasing Simchah" (this works at Purim time or any time), "What Gives You Strength?", "How Do You Work on Bitachon?" and "Hiskashrus" are popular subjects. You can use humor, as well. A sub-theme of an intimate farbrengen of seasoned baalei teshuvah was "My Funniest Blunder as a New BT." Tweak the names, topics and titles to suit yourself and the group.

Now, if you're from a different generation or cultural background than mine, some of these ideas might seem odd or uncomfortable to you. *That's fine.* Choose any topic and format that will speak to you and your group. Let your imagination romp far afield until you come up with a topic that really sizzles.

Designate a facilitator

Technically, the informal group farbrengen doesn't need a leader, but it might be a good idea to designate someone as initiator/moderator. This may be the woman who organized it or, if she is not comfortable in that role, another woman with leadership skills. The moderator will, in a gentle way, keep the process positive and constructive without offending anyone. As one friend put it, "You need something to gel the farbrengen, and often you need someone to help it gel."

Refreshments and ambience

The food at a farbrengen is not the main draw. Simple refreshments work well. A few bottles of water and seltzer, popcorn and vegetable sticks are fine. Or serve some mezonos, fruit and beverages. A motzoei Shabbos farbrengen lends itself well to asking each participant to bring a parve Shabbos leftover. (The only exception, when elaborate food is mandated, is at a Brachos Party. There, the table is purposely loaded with all types of foods over which each and every brachah is said... but that's a different topic.)

Once at a Chanukah birthday farbrengen, fresh herbed bread was served with dips and hot tea as we sat around the table illuminated only by candlelight. After the birthday celebrants (there were several) each said a few words and divrei Torah, we broke into small clusters of friends and farbrenged privately around the large table. The semi-darkness was utterly conducive to sharing. Remember, you can choose any time of day that works for your group: morning, afternoon or evening; Shabbos, Yom Tov or weekday. If you're a group of young moms, tote the toddlers and babies along with you. Focus and simplify the refreshments and ambience and make them work for you. Be as imaginative as you like in creating a pleasant, comfortable setting for your group.

Saying l'chaim is a must at a farbrengen. I personally feel that alcohol has no place at a women's farbrengen. It could be argued that the men need mashkeh in order to be able to speak honestly about their innermost feelings. In general, women don't need that kind of help. Moreover, the Rebbeim and male chassidim always drank wine or spirits at a farbrengen, whereas women traditionally did not. The women I know happily make l'chaim on a cup of iced tea or a few sips of grape juice.

Just a few simple rules

There are very few rules, but they are important ones:

a) Keep things positive, purposeful and constructive. A farbrengen is not a venting session.



A Memorable Farbrengen

I remember in particular one legendary farbrengen, which took place in a bungalow colony 30 years ago during the Nine Days when I was a kallah. Shterna Krinsky begged her elderly grandfather, Rabbi Peretz Mochkin a"h, to speak to the women. Reb Peretz Mochkin was a Shliach of the Frierdiker Rebbe and one of the first temimim to learn in Tomchei Temimim under the Rebbe Rashab. He served as mashpia in Montreal, and when our Rebbe first asked the chassidim to choose mashpiim, he was the head mashpia in Crown Heights. After protesting several times but continuing to receive considerable pressure from the women, who felt it was vital that they hear him, he finally consented. Dressed impeccably in his heavy Shabbos kapote, carefully pressed wool tzitzis and hat, his awe-inspiring face creased deeply with wisdom, Rabbi Mochkin sat in the field on that hot sunny day and farbrenged on the yahrtzeit of Reb Hillel Paritcher, in Yiddish. He opened the farbrengen by saying, "This is the first time I have ever taught women." Then he blushed.

"We were in awe that he agreed to farbreng for us so we could connect to the wealth he was connected to. Ultimately, he realized how important it was to us, so he broke himself and did it," his granddaughter, Mrs. Krinsky, marvels in retrospect. "This was probably the first and last time he farbrenged for women. We can learn so much from him, and other chassidim of his generation, about rising to the call of the hour, no matter how challenging."

What Women Say About Farbrengens:

"Farbrengens give us chayus. They help us to move forward, take on new challenges and improve. They help us to see where we are stuck and what we can do to get unstuck. With farbrengens, we can achieve a feeling of intimacy, of being part of a great whole. We can experience the joy of being a chassid, the vibrancy of life and growth." – G.

"My annual birthday farbrengen is a terrific 'fill-'er-up.' I take it with me and live with it for the whole year." – R.

"Once upon a time, Jews lived simply. They were stuck without herring and mashkeh in the middle of the Russian tundra, defending themselves against hostile gentiles, huddled together in ahavas Yisroel for each other. Today, we live a complicated existence – there is so much media, technology and constant interruption. Connecting to each other in profound ways is becoming increasingly rare. Are you feeling isolated? Then look at yourself honestly and work on yourself. Take up new interests. Connect with others who are tuned in to what people of your age and stage are experiencing today. In short, I am nudging people to have farbrengens." – Y.

"You don't have to be a rocket scientist to connect to other Jews through a farbrengen." – P.

"At an 'ordinary' block shiur/birthday farbrengen in Crown Heights a few years ago, the ladies ended the evening by saying l'chaim and bentching each other. One childless woman asked for a blessing for children, and all the participants blessed her wholeheartedly. Ten months later, the woman had a child." – N.

"When you're in a prison, you need someone to pull you out. This is what happens at a farbrengen: your fellow Jews will give you a hand and help you out of your personal prison." – L.

b) Make sharing safe. There is to be no other talking going on in the room. Everyone is to focus on the speaker, and there is no interrupting. Also, no one is allowed to repeat what someone said during the farbrengen outside the group without that person's permission. Keep the halachos of lashon hara: do not talk about your family/friends/husband/children, etc. without their explicit consent. The renowned Chana Epstein, who farbrengs about marriage for women, always announces to a group that whatever she says about her husband is with his full permission.

c) "Cut your fingernails" before you come to the farbrengen. The farbrenging style may vary rather widely according to group and culture. I understand that in some cases, not only are sensitive matters discussed, but pointed constructive criticism is meted out (although I personally have not experienced such a farbrengen). If you are going to criticize, make sure you do so with true ahavas Yisroel and without hurting others.

The process

Hold your farbrengen around a table, or on chairs or sofas in a circle. (If it's small, think outside the box – you can even farbreng at a picnic table at the park.) Start on time. The Frierdiker Rebbe said (*Sefer Hasichos 5706-5710, p. 200*) that at a chassidishe farbrengen one should begin with a dvar Malchus, which could be a story or a niggun. If you have six or more women, go in order around the circle (more people will share this way) and invite each person to share something related to the theme. For example, on the theme "What did you learn this year?" someone can talk about an exciting Torah concept that had a major effect on her, or can share a short dvar Torah or story. She can talk generally about an area in her life she is working on, such as controlling her temper, or organizing her home, or herbal medicine, describing a discovery she's made. Or she can talk about a particular event that had an impact on her. Participants can speak very personally or can choose to be more protective of their inner selves, and *the farbrengen format always, always respects people's personal boundaries.*

Remember – and remind participants if necessary – that each person has something vital to offer the group. One friend says, "I think it's important for each person to participate in a verbal way as well as in a 'neshamah' way. It's fine even if it's brief – as long as you share something and feel you are connecting, experiencing, affected by what is happening in the group so your life will in some way be changed for the better. This will lead to growth as well as connection to the other women there." If someone doesn't have anything to say at that moment, tell her the group will come back to her later. Of course, no one should ever be pressured to participate.

If you aren't comfortable with the go-around-the-circle system for your farbrengen, that method isn't engraved in stone. In last Pesach's issue of the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter*, R.L. Arzi described a different format that worked well for her group. Her birthday itself was the farbrengen's theme. She served her guests – relatives and close friends – a Shehecheyanu fruit alongside the other refreshments. Several people gave divrei Torah or told chassidishe stories, and the birthday honoree talked about her hachlatos. She gave and received brachos. Then everyone got up and danced spontaneously. In her mid-50's, she was so moved and satisfied by her very first birthday farbrengen that she is eagerly anticipating next year's birthday event.

What *shouldn't* be discussed at a farbrengen? We don't talk about changing the school system or community politics or the local shul. It's not a time for small talk, recipe exchanges or clowning for clowning's sake. The farbrengen is a time to talk about the important and meaningful things in our personal lives: our thoughts, our changing selves, or changing ourselves. Anything that doesn't relate to that goal doesn't belong at a farbrengen.

L'Chaim and brachos

Saying l'chaim and giving brachos are vital parts of a farbrengen. Many women in our generation are not accustomed to giving each other brachos, and initially some may be uncomfortable with the idea. One farbrengen friend explains, "Jews are good – we need to tell each other, 'May it go well for you. May you see revealed good in your life. May you be able to take on each day with happiness.' Once you open yourself and allow yourself to bentch and be bentched by people, you will get comfortable with it. The precise brachos you give and receive may not always come to fruition, but the brachah will always come true in one way or another." The moderator, or anyone else, can open this part of the farbrengen by asking, "Is there anyone you'd like to ask a brachah for – for health, parnassah, a child, a shidduch, success, anything?" People can then go around the circle and speak. Be spontaneous – use your own words, and speak from the heart. You don't have to sound like a rebbetzin; you just need to be yourself. Allow yourself to give, and allow yourself to take.

At your farbrengen, put all your expectations aside and be prepared to be astonished. Don't be surprised if you both laugh and cry. You may see dimensions of long-time acquaintances that you never noticed before. You may even make new friends as a result. Moreover, a wise man once said, "Off-the-point points are the real points." What I mean is, don't be surprised if the most meaningful part of the event for you is an off-hand comment made by someone who isn't even exactly on your wavelength. Singing adds a lot to a farbrengen; dancing is even better. But if they happen at all, these should not be forced – they need to flow naturally from the ambience itself.

Let me end with the remarks of several veteran farbrengers:

"If you're happy, if you look at the farbrengen as a positive experience, great things happen."

"Support and nurture each other – you will reap rich results from it."

"A farbrengen gives you a sense of achdus and the understanding that you are not alone – whatever you are facing, usually others have been there."

So go ahead – farbreng! And if you'd like to share, I'd love feedback – tell me about your farbrengen!

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