TURNING OUR BACKS

RABBI ELI FRIEDMAN
Chabad of Calabasas, CA.

I WISH I COULD HAVE MET REBBETZIN Chana. She was the Rebbe's mother and she lived in the apartment building next door to my father's childhood home.

By all reports, the Rebbetzin was a regal, soft-spoken woman, brilliant and kind—everything you might expect to find when you meet the mother of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Her husband, the saintly Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, the Rav of Yekaterinoslav for 30 years, was persecuted and exiled by the Communists until 1946 when he passed away in exile from starvation and deprivation.

In 1947, the Rebbe flew from New York to Paris and collected his refugee mother and brought her to the United States. She moved into an apartment at 1414 President Street and, despite her profound grief (besides her husband's passing, her son Dovber was murdered by the Nazis), she became a revered and beloved figure in the fledgling Lubavitcher community in Crown Heights.

Her son visited her every day. Even when he became the Rebbe of Lubavitch in 1950, he continued to carve out time every day to walk to President Street and spend time with his mother. And as Lubavitch grew and the Rebbe's responsibilities with it, the Rebbe never missed a day with his mother.

My father remembers how he and his friends would drop their toys and run to open the door when they saw the Rebbe approaching. (And he remembers Rebbetzin Chana coming downstairs one day and asking them with a smile to please let the Rebbe open the heavy steel door himself because he needs the exercise.)

Rebbetzin Chana told one of the *chassidim*: "When my son comes to visit me, after we spend some time together and he prepares to leave back



to his office, I notice how he makes his way to the door in a peculiar way. As he goes, he straightens a chair here, rearranges something there, all on his way to the door. He does this in such a way so that without being obvious about it, he never shows me his back. He thinks I don't notice, but I do."

REBBETZIN CHANA passed away on Shabbos Shuvah, the sixth day of Tishrei, in 1964. On the "Shabbos of Return," she returned her soul to Heaven. Ever since then, she is celebrated and remembered at this time of the year, in the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

But while the Rebbetzin is a paradigm in her own right, the timing of her passing has its own meaning. What can we glean from her story to polish our own Shabbos Shuvah and Yom Kippur experiences?

Here's a thought.

What is the significance of not showing your mother your back? Is there something terrible about the back?

The sight of someone's back means that they're leaving. And no-one should ever leave their mother. It's disrespectful. After everything a mother does for her baby, then her toddler, then her adolescent, then her teenager, then her adult child, how could he simply walk away from her? She never once walked away from him; the *chutzpah* of him to walk away from her!

But as G-d would have it, people have an obligation to live their lives. Eventually, a man has to leave his mother and go make a life for himself. In fact, the very act of leaving, becoming independent, brings the mother great *nachas*. And in that way, leaving Mom is all part of honoring her.

But despite all that, leaving your mother is still not okay. Even though it's something we all have to do, remembering that it's not okay is also something we all have to do. Even as we leave to build our own lives, we reverently back out, careful not to show our backs, careful to avoid a thoughtless or careless departure. Because, in truth, we should stay. We cannot, but we should.

When we leave with the feeling that we would much prefer to stay, this is called "backing out." It says, "I don't want to go and I know I shouldn't go, but I have to."

Backing out announces to the mother that her son is leaving only to go forth and live his life in the way she taught him to.

Mere mortals will remember this truth from time to time, on special occasions. The Rebbe was a man of truth, who lived truth and moved with truth, and a man like that cannot turn his back on his mother, figuratively or literally.

On Yom Kippur morning, shuls everywhere will fill to capacity as men and women arrive in droves for the *Yizkor* service. The souls of their dear departed parents will beckon them to shul and on the day that we ask to be inscribed for life, the children will remember those who gave them life.

And then, they will leave. The question is, though, should they? If *Yizkor* is truly about spending time in the company of departed parents, at one point should someone say, "Okay, that's enough, nice spending time with you, see you next Yom Kippur"?

But can a person spend the rest of his life in shul? Would that even make his parents happy? But how to walk out on a mother?

The answer is: You back out. Yes, *Yizkor* ends; Yom Kippur ends. And the child must leave and return to real life. But the son or daughter leaves only to go forth and live his or her life in the way Mom taught. (Maybe this is one of the reasons why we are commanded to begin building the *sukkah* as soon as Yom Kippur ends.)

With *Yizkor*, one generation reassures the previous one that *Am Yisroel Chai*, we are still Yom Kippur people, still *tzedakah* givers, still proud Jews. Walking out of *Yizkor* must not be the end of that reassurance. By backing out, the message is, I talked the talk, now I go to walk the walk. Watch me and be proud.

This year, when you leave after *Yizkor* (or after *shofar* or whenever), remember Rebbetzin Chana and her son the Rebbe who wouldn't show his back to his mother, and back out.

Gmar Chasimah Tovah!



Rabbi Eli Friedman and Mrs. Shaini Friedman are on shlichus in Calabasas, CA, with their five children