

FROM CHASLA TO LUB



AVITCH

REB ZEV WOLF AND DOBA NISNEVITCH

PEREL (CHEIN) BALKANY

AVITCH



1



2



3

"I will never marry a girl from my hometown," Zev Wolf Nisnevitch used to say. He did not plan to marry a small-town shtetl girl. He grew up in Chaslavitch, Russia. After World War II, he heard there was a girl from his hometown who had survived. Wanting information about his family, not knowing if anyone had survived, he scouted that girl, Doba Baskevitch. And that is how Zev Wolf Nisnevitch ended up marrying a girl from his hometown. A mentch tracht un G-tt lacht.



1. Doba, about 18, before her marriage. 2. Reb Zev Wolf Nisnevitch teaching Russian Jews Torah in the 1970's. 3. L-R: Doba's mother Luba, Doba, Luba's brothers Moshe and Haysha, and Doba's older sister Chaya Hinda. 4. Zev Wolf in the 1940's. 5. Moscow, early 1960's, L-R: Fania Rogatsky, Ella Chein, Luba Goldshmidt.



4



5

LIFE IN CHASLAVITCH

Zev Wolf was raised in a *frum*, *chassidishe* home in Chaslavitch, about 20 miles from Lubavitch, a town well-known in both Lubavitch and Litvish circles. After being freed from his imprisonment on Yud Tes Kislev, the Alter Rebbe spent his first Shabbos of freedom in Chaslavitch. The Litvish "royalty" also lived and studied in Chaslavitch. When Zev Wolf was growing up, there were nine *shuls* in Chaslavitch; seven were Litvish and two were Lubavitch. A long-standing tradition in the town was that the main Rav was Litvish and the *shochet* of the town was Lubavitch. During Zev Wolf's youth, the Rav of the town was Reb Moshe Soloveitchik and the town *shochet* was Eliyahu Yitzchok Nisnevitch, Zev Wolf's father.

Zev Wolf shared a *melamed* with Reb Moshe Soloveitchik's sons, Yoshe Ber and Aharon. Their *melamed* was a *chassidishe* man and he used to incorporate Chassidus and Tanya into his lessons. When Reb Moshe heard his sons were learning Chassidus, he spoke to his father, Reb Chaim Soloveitchik, asking him to urge his grandson to stop learning Chassidus. Reb Chaim did as his son asked and sat in a room with both his son and grandson Yoshe Ber, urging him to stop learning Chassidus. After his son Reb Moshe left the room, Reb Chaim turned to his grandson and told him to continue learning Chassidus, as it would be good for him.

After settling in America in the late 1970's, Zev Wolf met with his former classmate, Yoshe Ber Soloveitchik. They spent hours reminiscing about old times in their hometown of Chaslavitch. Zev Wolf spoke to Yoshe Ber about joining the board of directors, the rabbinical committee of F.R.E.E. (Friends of Refugees of Eastern Europe, where Zev Wolf worked). Having a famous and well-respected name like Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik on the board of directors would help open many doors for the organization. J.B. agreed. And now let's go back to the beginning...

THE LAST YECHIDUS

During Tishrei 1927, word got out that the Frierdiker Rebbe had to leave Russia very soon. Zev Wolf, a 14-year-old *bachur* at the time, traveled from Moscow with his father, an eight-hour train ride, to spend Simchas Torah with the Frierdiker Rebbe. Zev Wolf was one of only four people to have *yechidus* with the Rebbe on Motzoei Simchas Torah, just hours before the Rebbe fled Leningrad to Riga. The focus of the *yechidus* was to hear from the Rebbe which yeshiva he felt was most suitable for Zev Wolf. The Rebbe directed him to go learn in Nevel. In addition, the Rebbe *bentched* him with *arichas yamim* and told him, "*Zolst bleibin a chassidishe Yid.*" During his 99 years of life, Zev Wolf lived every day as a *chassidishe Yid.*

During his yeshiva years in Nevel, many of these young *tmimim* spent their days learning and their nights taking turns sleeping on benches, eating dinner at different families each night. Some families were so poor, the boys felt too bad going to their homes and partaking in their meager meals. So they skipped some meals altogether.


6


7


8

During WWII, Zev Wolf was drafted into the Russian army. He used to wake up extra early each morning to sneak out to the forest to put on *tefillin* (any religious observance was strictly forbidden). One day he was spotted while wearing his *tefillin*. He was immediately demoted from his status as a sergeant. A few days later the troops that had previously been under his command were sent out on a dangerous mission. Only a few of the men returned. One of them came to him and told him, "Your *karobitchky* [boxes] saved you." Even the *goyim* realized the power of his *tefillin*.

HIS FAMILY'S FATE

After the War, Zev Wolf found out he was the lone survivor of his family. He was told that his father Eliyahu Yitzchok had died of starvation in 1943 in Moscow. Avraham (Mayor) Drizin took it upon himself to risk his life to ensure a proper kosher burial for Zev Wolf's father. After digging a hole in the frozen solid winter ground, he gathered a *minyan* and recited *Kaddish*. He could have been shot on the spot for such a public religious act.

Zev Wolf's mother and sister were still living in Chaslavitch when word got out that the Nazis were entering their town, killing every Jew they found. Zev Wolf's teenage sister Ettel wanted to try and escape, but her mother had a problem with her feet and she was not able to run quickly. Though she knew her fate, Ettel refused to leave her mother behind. Her friend Doba Baskevitch did not have any family to stay behind for. Ettel and her mother begged Doba to run away and try to save herself. Doba escaped death, crawling through wires and jumping over a fence, running into the freezing winter forest. Ettel and her mother along with all the Jews in their town were killed by the Nazis.

Doba's father, Avraham, was originally married to a woman named Doba who died young, leaving two young daughters. She also left behind a younger sister named Luba, who was engaged


9


10


11

and had visas to leave to America with her *chosson* and his family (the ultimate dream come true at that time and place). But Luba's father asked her to give up her life with her *chosson*, her future in the "*goldene medinah*," and instead to stay in Russia and marry her departed sister's husband Avraham, because "*di kinder darfn hubben a mama* [the children need a mother]." Luba obediently, selflessly, gave up the life she had planned and married her brother-in-law Avraham, becoming a mother to her sister's children.

Luba and Avraham had two children together, Meir Nota and baby Doba (named after her aunt, the mother of her half-siblings).





6. Photo Credit: JEM/Living Archive ID 68248©. 7. Reb Zev Wolf Nisnevitch (circled) at farbrengen. 8. Doba Nisnevitch (second to left) in Russia with friends, approximately 1960. 9. L-R: Fania Rogatsky, Luba Goldshmidt, Babula (Doba), the author (Perel Balkany), and her mother (Ella Chein). 10. Doba (left) working as a cook in Bais Rivkah.



When baby Doba was only two years old, her father Avraham passed away. Luba was now left with four children to raise on her own. Luba sold her home-made challah every Friday to help provide for her children. When Doba was 14, her mother Luba suddenly contracted a disease and died within a week. Doba was left orphaned of both parents, forced to fend for herself as WWII began. Doba, all alone, ran from village to village, spending days hiding in the freezing forests, eating nothing but the occasional berry or plant, always just a step ahead of the Nazis. During the War she finally made her way to Uralsk where her older sister Sarah lived.

After the War, after hearing there was someone alive from his hometown of Chaslavitch, Zev Wolf tracked down Doba in Uralsk, to try to find information about his family. Though she had to tell him that his family had not survived, they came to realize that Zev Wolf's own mother and sister had saved Doba's life by urging her to run away.

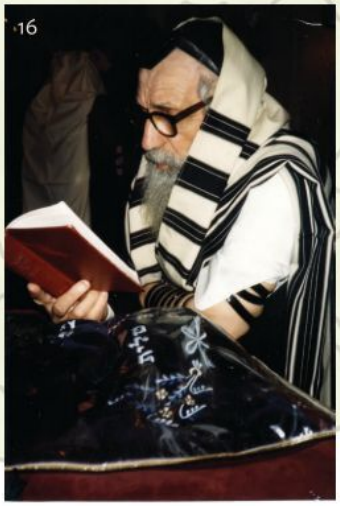




11. Life in the "goldeneh medinah," after settling in Crown Heights. L-R: Ella Chein, Fania Rogatsky, Babula, Esther Chein. 12. Reb Zev Wolf receiving lekach in the 1980's with grandsons Eli and Dovid Rogatsky and Asher Goldshmidt. 13. Top row L-R: Ina Nisnevitch, Avraham Nisnevitch, and their son Benny. Bottom row L-R: Lazer Nisnevitch, Zev Wolf, and Doba. 14. Reb Zev Wolf learning at home. 15. Babula (Doba). 16. Karobitchky.

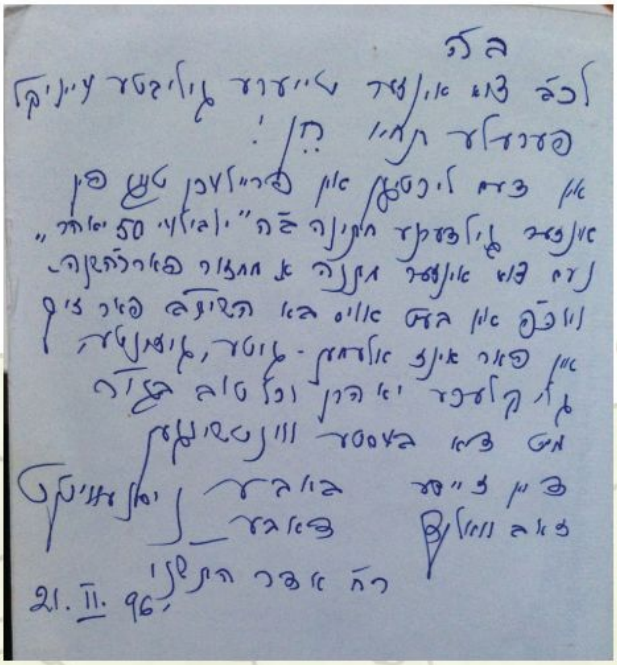






POSTWAR LIFE

Zev Wolf and Doba married in Samarkand, Russia, on March 5, 1946, two orphans possessing almost nothing. Doba's trousseau consisted of a borrowed wedding dress, borrowed wedding shoes that were a size too big and a borrowed wedding ring that had to be returned after *sheva brachos*. The wedding meal was cooked by the *kallah* herself, while fasting, on her wedding day. Their marriage was filled with a deep love, devotion and commitment to each other and to living a *frum* life. They wanted to rebuild what was destroyed. This determination helped them raise their six children as *frum Yidden* who were proud and committed to their Yiddishkeit, even in Soviet Russia. Their children are: Luba Goldshmidt of Lod, Israel; Fania Rogatsky, Ella Chein (the author's mother), and Avraham Nisnevitch, all of Crown



At their 50th wedding anniversary in the late 1990's, my grandparents presented each child and grandchild with a machzor inscribed personally to each individual. This is the inscription inside mine.

Heights, NY; Lazer Nisnevitch of New Jersey and Esther Chein of Crown Heights, NY.

Zev Wolf, having studied in Tomchei Tmimim in Nevel, was well known amongst all the Lubavitch families in Samarkand. Though she came in as a stranger, Doba quickly won the respect and admiration of everyone in town. Her humility was her outstanding quality. She knew how to give and forgive. She believed in always being *mevater* and keeping the peace. She treated every person she met, distinguished or not, big or small, with respect and kindness. Every *mitzvah* she did was with sincere *kavanah*. Doba was not a simple woman, but she chose to live a simple life.

Shortly after their wedding, Zev Wolf and Doba were able to secure false papers which would give them the incredible opportunity to leave Russia. More good news, Doba found out she was pregnant.

Leaving Russia and moving to a place where Yiddishkeit could be practiced freely was a dream at that time. Many *frum* Jews were escaping from Russia, yet many were also caught in the planning stage or during their escape. After finding out she was pregnant, Doba was too afraid to go ahead with their plans to leave Russia. She felt it was putting her unborn child's life in danger, while Zev Wolf wanted to go ahead with their plans to leave the country. This was the first and last real disagreement of their marriage.

Though their lives were filled with many difficult decisions and challenging situations, Zev Wolf and Doba had an incredibly loving, peaceful and respectful marriage. While Doba always respected Zev Wolf and lived her life as a true *eishes chayil*, on this issue she stood her ground and refused to leave Russia at that time. She was, then and always, extremely protective of her children.

Doba's children recall that when their youngest sister was hospitalized as a one-year-old, parents were banned from the hospital after visiting hours. After many warnings to leave, Doba kept hiding, even crawling under her baby's crib so that she could remain close to her baby. The hospital staff eventually gave up on her and said she could stay overnight. (They never bent such rules for anyone–but they had also never been faced with such a determined and devoted mother.)

When Doba went into labor with her third daughter, Ella, her two-year-old daughter Fania was very sick. Doba knew that the hospital required a minimum 10-day stay. Not wanting to leave her sick toddler without her for ten days, she did what was then, in the 1950s, very uncommon. She chose to give birth at home with a midwife instead of in the hospital with a doctor, so she could stay home and continue to watch over her sick child. Doba was a woman who always spoke gently and softly, but if anyone ever got between her and her children, she knew how to do what had to be done for the children's sake.

A NEW LIFE IN MOSCOW

In the early 1950's, Zev Wolf and Doba were happily settled in Samarkand with their three young daughters. One night the KGB came to their home, looking for Reb Zev Wolf. Doba was hysterical as they took her husband "for a talk." Reb Zev Wolf came home a few hours later and told his wife that the KGB had "offered" him a job as an informant. When the KGB offers you a job, you take it. Zev Wolf refused to accept such a job. He boldly asked the KGB officer to give him until the next day so that he could discuss the offer with his wife. The officer laughed but let him go and told him to report back to the office the next day.

Zev Wolf was a man of action. He never wasted a minute and never second-guessed what had to be done. He always thought logically and methodically and then acted swiftly. He came home that night to tell Doba about the job offer he could not accept and explained that it was no longer safe for them to stay in Samarkand. He told her he planned to travel to Moscow that night (a three-day train ride). His parents had owned a home in Moscow and the house now belonged to him.

He left that night, giving Doba the address in Moscow to memorize. He told her to hide by a neighbor for a few days and, when she felt it was safe, she should travel with their three young girls to Moscow and meet him at that address. Not knowing if she would ever see him again, she said goodbye and hid for three days in the closet of her neighbor *tbl"ch* Luba Pinson (wife of Reb Shea Pinson *a"h*).

When Zev Wolf failed to report to the KGB office the next day, they came looking for him. The door was opened by a frantic relative. She said that Zev and Doba had left the night before, saying they would be gone for a few hours, and they still had not returned. She said she had no idea where they were and she was

stuck watching their little girls, not knowing when their parents would return for them. The KGB continued coming back for the next few days, looking for Zev Wolf or Doba. A few days later, in the dark of night, accompanied by a brave neighbor, Doba traveled to Moscow, not sure where exactly she was going (she did not have GPS or Waze to help her find her way in a strange city, and she didn't dare ask strangers for help). She did find the house and her husband was there!

Over the years, I've heard from various people of the older generation that Reb Zev Wolf and Doba Nisnevitch's home became the unofficial Chabad House of Moscow. It was a kosher bed-n-breakfast in the heart of Moscow, where at times kosher chicken was not available for six months, yet everyone was welcomed and all were fed. Today, their children continue to host like their mother Doba did. Even if serving only one guest, they put out a whole spread, so the guest will feel comfortable taking as much as he wants without anyone noticing how much he ate.

They hosted weddings in their home, Doba acting as the kosher caterer, her home the hall. She was the self-appointed *bikur cholim*. She cooked homemade kosher meals for various elderly people who still kept kosher but were unable to cook for themselves. I remember my mother (Doba's daughter Ella Chein) telling me that as a teenager, her job every Friday would be to deliver Shabbos food to a few regular "customers." Some of these customers lived a long walking distance away, or required one or more trains to reach their homes. This delivery meant carrying heavy pots of soup and Shabbos food a long distance. The food was always fresh, delicious and delivered with a smile. This makes me realize how much easier it is for us to fulfill this *mitzvah*. We have the convenience of cars, Tupperware, disposable pans... Maybe we can all try to occasionally volunteer for our local Bikur Cholim by cooking meals or visiting a sick or elderly person. [The Crown Heights Bikur Cholim may be reached at (718) 467-1661 or info@bikurcholimch.org.]

As the years went on, life in Moscow became physically more comfortable. Reb Zev Wolf ran a successful printing business and was now able to buy Doba jewelry and fancy clothes, but Doba refused them because she did not value material things. Instead, she treated herself to the pleasure of using any extra money they had to help others. Indeed, they helped many Jews pay the exorbitant fees for visas and other documents and successfully escape Russia.

Doba taught her children not to value physical things. She taught them the importance of *chessed* and to do it *b'simchah*, telling her children and grandchildren the lesson of *Hayom Yom, 24 Cheshvan,* "Always look lower, at those who have less than you. Then you will always be content and grateful for what you have."

THE REBBE'S SOLDIER

In 1973, the Nisnevitch family finally emigrated to Eretz Yisroel. The family settled in Kfar Chabad, where Reb Zev Wolf landed a good job in a bank. The following summer, in August of 1974, Reb Zev Wolf traveled alone to New York to celebrate the *bris* of his grandson (Dovid Rogatsky, first child of his daughter Fania) and to have his first *yechidus* with the Rebbe. During this *yechidus*, the Rebbe spoke about the huge emigration of Russian Jews to the United States that was occurring at that time. Though Reb Zev Wolf told the Rebbe that he and his family were settled in Israel and he was only here on a short visit, the Rebbe told him that he should stay in New York. It was highly unusual for the Rebbe to tell someone to leave Eretz Yisroel in order to move to America. He explained that many of the Jews coming from Russia were well educated and they needed to be approached by someone they could relate to and respect. The Rebbe felt that Reb Zev Wolf, being very articulate and well educated himself, would be a good Shliach and would be accepted by the Russian refugees as an equal. The Rebbe asked him to stay in New York and teach the Russian Jews about Yiddishkeit. Like the soldier he was in his youth, Reb Zev Wolf followed everything his leader commanded. He was a real *tamim*.

The Rebbe told him to stay and so he did. Reb Zev Wolf remained alone in New York for over two years, while his wife Doba and their youngest children remained in Israel until they were all able to obtain documents to come live in New York. In 1976, after not seeing them for two years, Reb Zev Wolf was reunited with his family in Crown Heights. Doba became the cook in Bais Rivkah, a job she maintained and worked hard in for 29 years until she retired in 2005. During *shivah* for Doba (who passed away one year ago on Gimmel Shvat), many Bais Rivkah staff and students alike shared how much they enjoyed Doba's gracious and warm "*a gut morgin*" and her soft-spoken, kind words. Many said they would purposely enter the school through the back entrance in order to pass through the kitchen and have a word with her.

LIFE IN THESE UNITED STATES

For the next three decades, Reb Zev Wolf devoted his life to helping and teaching Russian Jewish immigrants. He worked at F.R.E.E. teaching people about Hashem and Yiddishkeit, leading Pesach *sedarim*, giving *shiurim*, etc. He was heavily involved in the *mitzvah* of *bris milah*, persuading and arranging and even collecting funds for immigrants to have a *bris*. He learned with boys for their bar mitzvah, he arranged *levayos*, he helped people find apartments and Jewish schools for their children. Nothing was too menial for him. He lived and breathed the Rebbe. The Rebbe had told him to do everything he could to teach and help his Jewish brothers and he looked at every task as following the Rebbe's command.

From 1970 through the early 1980's, the Rebbe would visit three public *sedarim* before beginning his own Pesach *seder*. His first stop was at the *bachurim's* dorm at 1414 President Street. Next the Rebbe would stop at F.R.E.E., and last at Machon Chana. (From 1979 the Rebbe also stopped at Hadar Hatorah, to visit the newly arrived Persian immigrants.) One year, Doba came to F.R.E.E. to be at the public *seder* that her husband Rabbi Nisnevitch was running. There was an overwhelming crowd of people and Doba

found herself stuck outside, unable to pass through the crowd of men. A few minutes later, the Rebbe walked towards the stairs of F.R.E.E. and of course the crowd parted for him as he began to walk up the steps. While walking, the Rebbe noticed Doba standing on the side. He recognized her and, seeing her predicament, he motioned for her and her young daughter to follow him as he walked in through the crowd, leading her inside, directly to her husband. The Rebbe noticed everything and everyone.

Reb Zev Wolf did not look for or appreciate *kavod*. Well into his nineties you could see him standing at the bus stop, waiting to take two or three buses to give a *shiur*, to attend a *bris*, to help another Yid. When people offered to send a car for him, he simply waved his hand and said it wasn't necessary. He was meticulous with time and never kept anyone waiting. Though Hashem runs the world, I feel that my grandfather Reb Zev Wolf Nisnevitch held on in this world for a few more days because the timing wasn't yet right. Though he was not well enough to attend the wedding of his granddaughter Malky (Chein) Chitrik, he did not want to take away from the *simchah*, so he returned his *neshamah* to Hashem a few hours after the last *sheva brachos* ended.

EYES IN THE GEMARA

Any time I saw my dear Zaide sitting, he was holding a *sefer*. During the last few years of his life, when he wasn't as mobile, he spent most of his day going to and from shul. He never missed a *minyan* as long as he was physically able to walk to shul. He said *Kaddish* for people who did not have anyone to do it for them. During his last few years, as he became weaker, he spent much more time at home with his wife, my dear grandmother Doba, whom we always called Babula. When their children and grandchildren came to visit, he would say hello, ask how everyone was, and when we started talking to Babula, his eyes would go back in his *Gemara* and that's where his focus remained unless someone called his name.

In my late teens, I used to join my grandparents for lunch once a week. Once, while sitting and talking to Babula, I looked over to the other side of the table and saw Zaide, fully concentrating on his *Gemara*. Young and naïve, I asked her, "Doesn't it bother you that your husband sits right across from you and ignores you?"

Babula burst out laughing so hard that Zaide looked up from his *Gemara* questioningly. When she told him what I had asked, he looked at her seriously and asked her, "*Does* it bother you?"

Babula said, "Of course it doesn't bother me, why would it? If I need you, you answer me, and if not, I'm happy you're learning and I'm content just having you here next to me." *Chochmas nashim bansah beisah*.

I think of that day often to remind myself that we wives should give our husbands the freedom to do what they need to do. Though it's hard to come to the end of a long day and the kids are finally asleep... and you finally have some quiet time with your husband... and there he is learning or going to a *shiur*... we should try to appreciate that he is spending his free time that way, keeping in mind that his Torah affects the atmosphere in the home and benefits the whole family in many ways. (See *Hayom Yom, Daled Cheshvan.*) Let us remind ourselves to act as Doba Nisnevitch did.

Part of her contribution to her husband, to her marriage, and to their Shlichus was the way she took more work upon herself in order to give him the opportunity and freedom to *do*. Whether that meant respecting that he chose to spend his free time learning, traveling to teach others, helping immigrants write a resume so they could find a job, organizing a *bris* or even being separated for two long years because the Rebbe told him to stay in New York, she knew he was a soldier in the Rebbe's army and she was his support system. He was completely dedicated to the cause and she was completely dedicated to him. She tried to put no demands on him. She devoted her life to taking care of him and their children. Zaide would often tell Babula, "I share all of my *mitzvos* with you."

A YIDDISHE MAMA

Babula knew everything that was going on with every grandchild. As a child, I didn't realize what a special blessing it was to have my grandparents living next door and seeing them almost every day. Every Shabbos, before, during and after shul, their children and grandchildren would stop by to say *Gut Shabbos* and stay for a while. Babula thanked every single person who came, young or old, and served her favorite cookies to make even the youngest guests happy. As my brother Peretz said at wher *shloshim*, "Any time you needed an ego boost, you would just go visit Babula. You came out feeling like a million bucks!"

The last few years of my grandparents' lives were both physically and emotionally challenging for their six children. But there was never a complaint. Instead, as they took turns spending their days and nights at their parents' sides, they spoke of what an honor it was to have the opportunity to show their love, devotion and respect to their parents. Only kind, soft words were spoken between parent and child, never a raised voice. Come to think of it, the only time I did hear them arguing was over who would stay overnight with their parents—each of the siblings was encouraging the others to go home and rest, but nobody wanted to leave!

During the last few weeks of her life, Babula loved being surrounded by her children. Though she knew it was hard for them to spend so much time with her, she constantly thanked them and told them, "There will come a time that you will want to come and there will be nowhere to come to." She was painfully right.

My beloved grandparents Reb Zev Wolf and Doba Nisnevitch started their lives together as two orphans with one goal, to raise a *Yiddishe, chassidishe* family. They sacrificed so much and had incredible *mesiras nefesh*. Their struggle was blessed with success, for their grandchildren and great-grandchildren live lives of Torah and *mitzvos*, with many now on Shlichus around the world, continuing to spread Yiddishkeit.■

Perel Balkany and her husband Levi live in Crown Heights with their children.