OVER 100 CHABAD HOUSES I CALL HOME

By Dr. David Nesenoff

The headlines of our lives will come and go, but never forget the words — Hashgachah Pratis, Divine Providence. It is the constant. The ink will fade and the paper will turn to dust, but the Writer and His story will remain. Hasgachah Pratis. The Holy One Blessed Be He is always in charge. It was early May 2010 and I sat at my desk in my office at home. I stared at my computer screen...



If you turn off your Facebook for just a moment, you will see reflected in the screen your actual face. Who am I? I had been a Conservative rabbi for 20 years, but each of us has our moment or moments when we evaluate our life and ponder our purpose. What do I really want to do? I don't want to do what I did before. What is important to me? What will I accomplish in my future? While we are contemplating and churning our deepest thoughts within our soul, we may even begin to think that we are figuring it out. It is so difficult for us to understand, especially at those moments, that the story has already been written.

The Land of Israel was on my mind. My wife Nancy and I had recently returned from Israel and I literally cried on the plane. I'm too embarrassed to give the details. But whenever I leave her, I cry.

I decided that I wanted to do something for Israel. I was going to make small video snippets of Jews talking about Israel. I would ask, "Any comments on Israel?" And they would say how much they like the spirituality or the falafel or the archeology or the beaches. And I would put them on the Internet and the whole world would see that Israel is a beautiful place. All the ills and ill wills against her would be readjusted. I would put the short pro-Israel comments on my website, and presto, everyone (for some reason) would watch it. At the time, my website RabbiLIVE.com was being used to broadcast prayer services for American Jewish soldiers in Afghanistan, Iraq, and on aircraft carriers... and also for some very lazy Jews in Boca Raton, Florida. I figured this website would be the best place to post my future Israel falafel video snippets. I would push that magic viral video button on my computer keyboard and help Israel's public relations in the world.

Meanwhile my teenage son Adam Natan was up in his room, also busy. (We named him Adam Natan because he was the first male on my wife's side in 90 years.) He had a website of his own for teenagers to learn and talk about Jewish topics. He is quite a remarkable young man. He had gone to Washington and streamed on his website the entire AIPAC pro-Israel lobbying conference by himself. So, in May, Adam called up the White House and requested to attend the President's Chanukah celebration for the following December. (He somehow knows how to contact the right people.) They asked him if he was confused. "Are you sure you mean the Chanukah celebration and not the upcoming Jewish Heritage Celebration?"

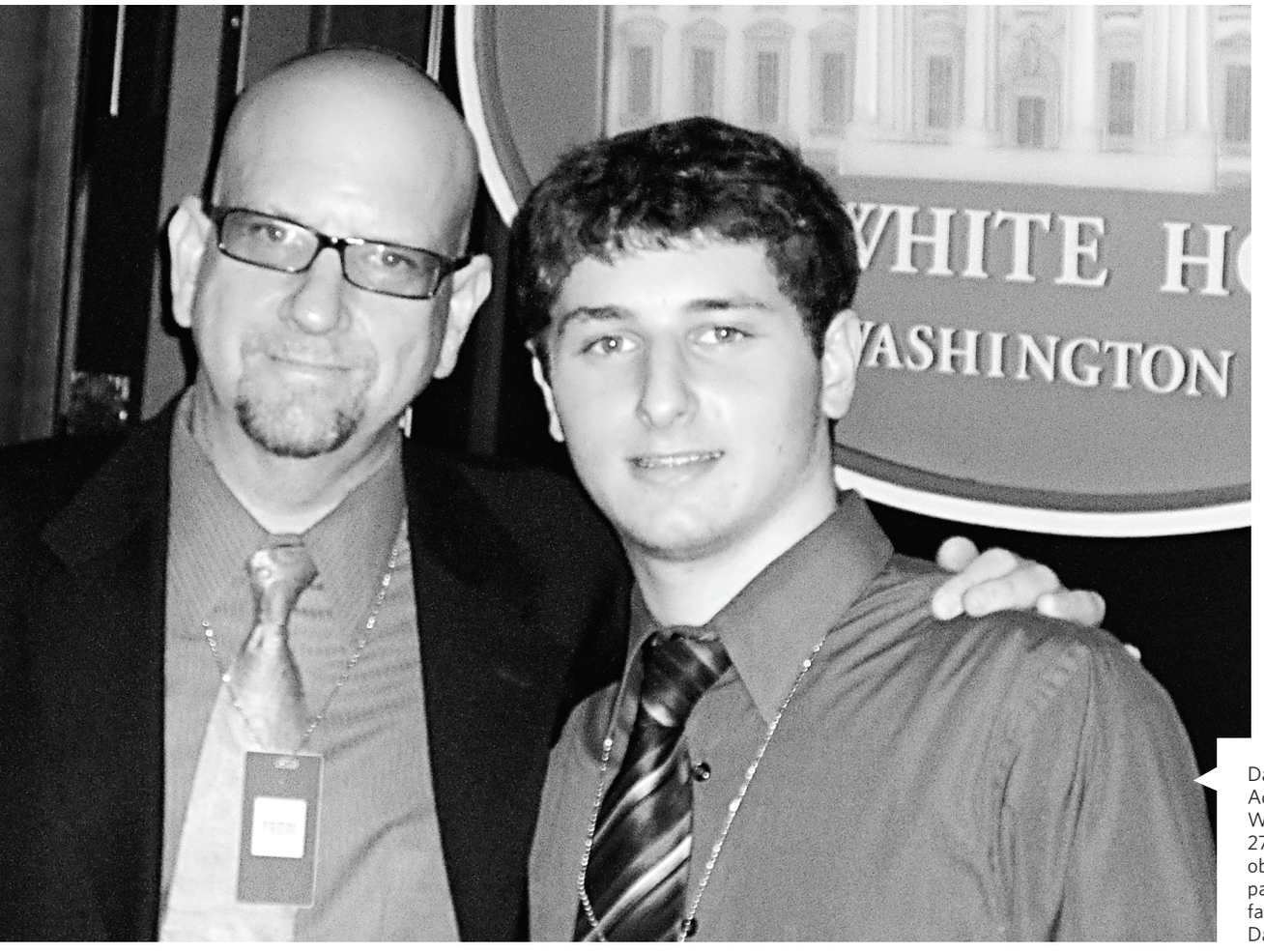
"Oh, the upcoming Jewish Heritage Celebration," he answered. (It is a proud parental moment when our children know how to lie correctly.) The White House media office was kind enough to provide press credentials for Adam, his friend Daniel Landau, and me.

I took time out from my busy schedule of contemplating my life, and how I was going to single-handedly rescue Israel, and drove down with the two teenagers to



celebrate Jewish Heritage Month with the president. Before then, I didn't even know there was a Jewish Heritage Month. In fact, it seemed to me that there were more than an adequate number of Jewish holidays on the calendar. But maybe this was a good place to find a group of Jews to ask my "Any comments on Israel?" question and put a spotlight on my precious Jewish homeland.

On May 27, 2010, I stood in the White House briefing room on my cell calling very specifically, anyone and everyone, bragging, "You'll never guess where I am!" Suddenly, I saw through the window former President Bill Clinton walk by. We all ran to the door as he passed. We



David and his son Adam Nesenoff at the White House, May 27, 2010. At 17, Adam obtained the press passes for himself, his father, and his friend Daniel Landau.

said hello and he greeted us swiftly as he moved along. I turned to the person next to me and said, "That's Bill Clinton!" The man said, "I know. I'm Joe Biden." I didn't realize that I was talking to the Vice President.

We attended President Obama's first press conference in 10 months, in the East Room of the White House. The topic was the oil leak in the gulf. It seemed so important back then. There were television channels devoted to just watching the liquid spill out 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The three of us each had our seemingly brilliant questions that we would ask if called upon. The East Room is rather large and was packed with seasoned reporters from all over the world. We were rather naïve. Only a handful of journalists was given the honor to ask a question. Helen Thomas, the dean of the White House Press Corps, was one of them.

The president's briefing was over and we had an hour before the afternoon's long awaited Jewish Heritage Celebration. We thought we would leave the grounds of the White House for a little while. I was hesitant to exit and return, as I was amazed that they let us in the first time; I didn't want to push my luck.

As we headed for the gate, I noticed Helen Thomas walking toward us. Our paths were about to cross. I mentioned to my son and his friend that she is the most famous reporter in the world. She had been at the White House for 60 years covering ten U.S. presidents, since the times of Eisenhower and Kennedy. She was the only member of the Washington press to have a designated seat of her own; it was front row, center, in the White House briefing room. She was a journalist for 60 years and I was a journalist for 60 seconds; I figured it was time we met. So we stopped and exchanged pleasantries with her. Although my cameras were in the White House, I had my small Flip video camera on me and I started filming. She looked directly into the lens and

was rather gracious with advice about journalism. "You'll always keep people informed and you'll always keep learning," she said.

I was waiting for later in the day to shoot my Israel question at the guests of the Jewish celebration, but something made me fire one round a little early. "Any comments on Israel?"

Hashgachah Pratis. The ultimate Creator of this story and all stories placed in my camera the snippet to aid my dear Israel and change my life. She said, "Tell them to get the hell out of Palestine." If I was in a back alley in New York and a skinhead said that to me, we would probably rumble and fight. But we were at the White House, she was 89 years old, and if you've seen my photo, I'm the skinhead. The whole thing was very confusing. So I decided to be a journalist and I asked her, "Where should they go?" And she said, "Home!" And I inquired, "Where's home?" And she remarkably replied, "Poland and Germany."

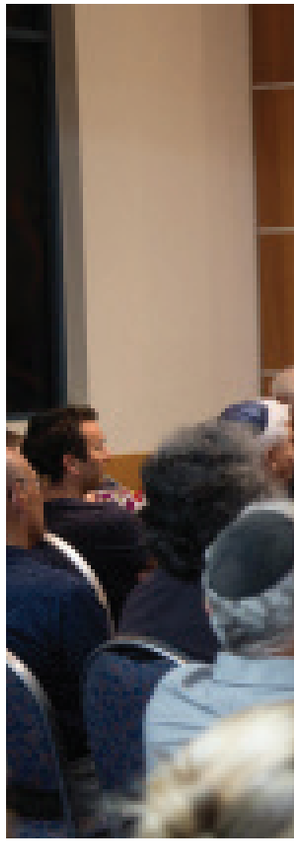
Back home to Poland and Germany. I wish I could go back to the shtetlach and shtieblach of the homes and villages of Poland. My grandparents' town of Drobnin, where on a Friday evening the smell of challah, no doubt, permeated the shtetl and the twinkling of candles shone through the windows of each and every home, as the singing of Sholom Aleichem echoed through the woods. I wish I could go back and see and smell and taste that beautiful Shabbos. But not one shtetl, not one candle, not one Jew is there. They're all gone. The anti-Semites erased them.

We went back to New York with the video. I called a writer from *The Jewish Week* and told him what happened and he said to me two words: "No story." I had not only suffered anti-Semitism on the White House lawn, but I was now touched by secular Jewish apathy in New York. I wanted to post the video immediately on the internet and stream it through my website. But even if you are a billionaire CEO, with private jets and thousands of employees, you need to hire a 15-year-old to figure out how to put something on a website. (And those who can afford it can hire a 12-year-old to do it.) I needed my son to post the video and unfortunately he was tied up with final exams and Driver's Ed. An entire week went by and the video remained in my camera.



HELEN THOMAS WAS FORCED TO RESIGN IN SHAME AND HER CO-AUTHOR AND AGENTS DROPPED HER.

Hashgachah Pratis. Something happened that week in the Middle East; a global story took place that is still part of the very fabric of today's headlines. The flotilla. A boat, carrying terrorists from Turkey, defying the Israeli security blockade to Gaza, was boarded by Israeli soldiers. The terrorists beat the Israelis with metal rods and threw some overboard. Finally the Israelis shot and killed some terrorists who were trying to kill them. The whole world was against Israel. Helen Thomas stood up in the White House, inches in front of the President, before the entire international press corps and said, "It was a deliberate massacre by Israel against peace activists on the high seas." (That would be the last time she ever stood in the White House.) That night my son had some time. We posted the video at around 2 a.m. Friday morning. We forwarded it to some people including the Jewish blogger Jeff Dunetz, publisher of a website called Yidwithlid. My son went away for a teenage Shabbaton for the weekend. On Motzoei Shabbos I turned on the computer to see if anyone had looked at the video. There were over 700,000 views. (And that's just the people who didn't observe Shabbos.) By Sunday it went viral,



into the millions.

At a time when the events of the flotilla fueled the foggy views of anti-Israel and anti-Semitic people, my video cleared the air and caused the sun to shine on the anti-Semites, to expose them for what and who they really are. Helen Thomas was forced to resign in shame and her co-author and agents dropped her. She was banished from the White House and her name was removed from her front row seat and from various awards throughout the country.

Every media outlet in the world converged on me. The good, the bad and the ugly covered the story. I received thousands of threatening hate emails as well. Law enforcement and private agencies got involved. Everyone in the world wanted to know about the guy behind the camera; my inbox was flooded with the entire international press corps asking for interviews. Sitting at the computer in my son's room with the soccer ball wallpaper and little desk, I was overwhelmed as to how I was supposed to handle all this. I thought that this would be a good time for some Hashgachah Pratis. And then the phone rang. It was Ari Fleisher, former President Bush's White House Press Secretary. He advised me that I should have a definitive message. It was important that I know what message I wanted to deliver to the world. My son returned home from school. I told him that Ari Fleisher had called. My son said, "I know; I told him to call you." (Who is this kid?)

My son said, "You can speak to anyone in the world; who do you want me to call for advice to find out what our message is?" I thought for a moment and then I said one name; and sure enough within seconds, my son handed me the phone to speak with Elie Wiesel.

I knew I was going to be on CNN, Fox, CBS, local, international, TV, print, radio, blogs, and as per Ari's counsel, I asked, "Professor Wiesel, what is my message?" He said that he had read in a newspaper that I daven with Chabad each morning and he suggested that I should find out what the Rebbe would have wanted me to say.

I remember I couldn't figure out which I was more confused and amazed about. The fact that Elie Wiesel was giving me advice to find out what the deceased Lubavitcher Rebbe would have me say, or that I was now in a surreal world where Elie Wiesel, over his morning coffee, was reading about which minyan I attend.

I told my local dear Chabad Rabbi, the Stony Brook Long Island Shliach Chaim

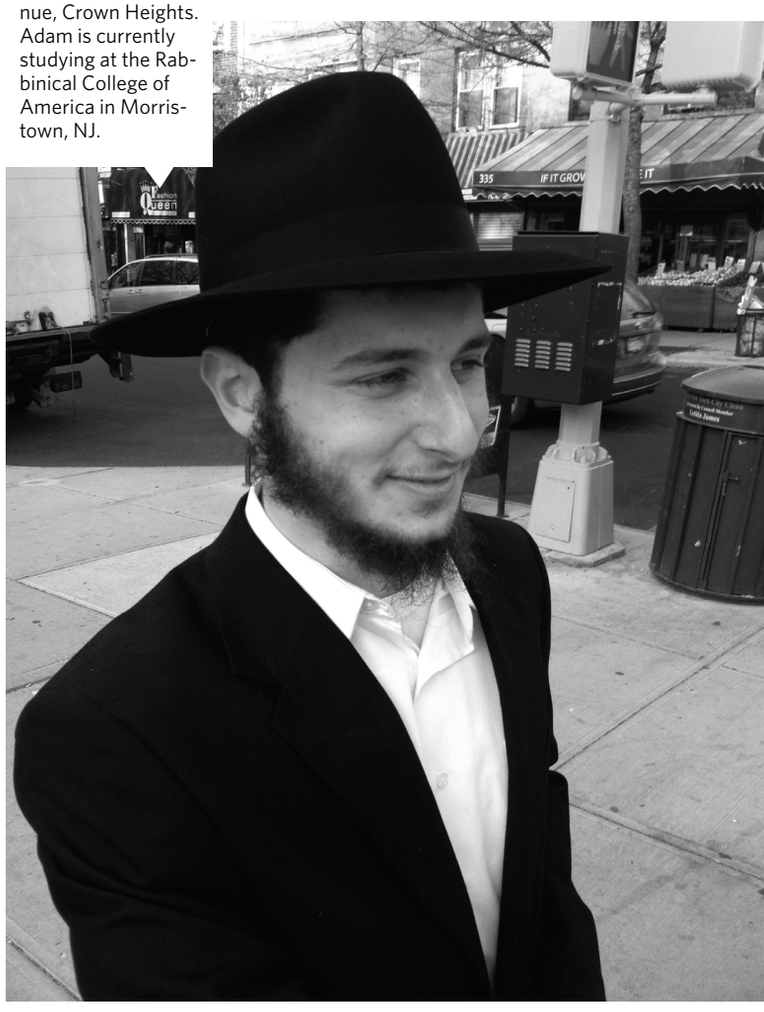


David Nesenoff speaking at Chabad of Malvern (suburb of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia).



David Nesenoff (L) called for Jonathan Pollard's release at the Israel Day Concert in Central Park, NY, June 5, 2011. International star singer Avraham Fried performed at the event and met with Nesenoff backstage.

David's son Adam Natan Nesonoff on Kingston Avenue, Crown Heights. Adam is currently studying at the Rabbinical College of America in Morristown, NJ.





Rabbi Eliezer (Lazer) Lazaroff, Director of Chabad at Texas Medical Center, with David Nesenoff. Rabbi Lazer and Mrs. Rochel Lazaroff run the world-renowned Aishel House.



David Nesenoff on the cactus-laden grounds of Cong. Young Israel of Tucson, where Rabbi Yossi and Mrs. Chanie Shemtov are Chabad Shluchim.



Grossbaum, that Elie Wiesel had told me to find out what the Rebbe would want me to say. Without any hesitation he said, "Okay, let's find out." (I love Chabad for always jumping forward to accomplish the goal; any other group would form a committee to vote on when to hold the next meeting and take a new vote.)

We contacted Rabbi Abraham Shemtov as to what the Rebbe's wisdom would be in this circumstance; Rabbi Shemtov is a dear renowned individual who has great knowledge of the Rebbe's words and also terrific insight into world politics and media. I listened. I remember it sounded at one point like he was quite moved; I was too.

"If you have a friend and you don't see him for a little while; he is still your friend. But if you don't see him for 50 years, you can't be sure if he is still your friend," Rabbi Shemtov said. "But if your child goes away for a little while, he is still your child; and if you child goes away for months or even years, he is still your child. And if G-d forbid you don't see your child for 50 years, he is still your child.

"We are not the friends of Israel.

"We are the Children of Israel. Sometimes we are away for a few hundred years in Egypt, or a thousand years in Persia, or Spain, or North America... sometimes we are away for a few years in Auschwitz. But we are still the Children of Israel. Israel and the Children of Israel are one. It doesn't matter where or when you are born and live and what language you speak or what century or era you come from; we are always the Children of Israel. We, and Israel, exist because of each other; G-d gave this Land to us. The Jew walking on the street in New York, whether or not he even knows or cares about Israel, exists because of Israel and Israel is alive because of him."

Two days later I was on CNN's "Reliable Sources" with Howard Kurtz. I can't remember what he asked me, but I know the answer was that the Children of Israel and the Land of Israel are one, and that is what Helen Thomas and those who want to delegitimize Israel are denying.

HELEN THOMAS SAID, "GO HOME." AND I DID. AFTER BEING A CONSERVATIVE RABBI FOR OVER 20 YEARS, I TRAVELED HOME.

Two months later I drove across the United States with my son, asking questions to everyone from Jackie Mason to the Grand Dragon of the KKK for a documentary film about anti-Semitism and hatred. (The film later premiered at the Simon Wiesenthal Center Museum of Tolerance.) Upon returning home, I was asked to be the keynote speaker at Yale University's inaugural symposium on global anti-Semitism. Before I spoke, the chairman of the symposium, Professor Charles Asher Small, introduced me but paused to explain to the audience of international professors why I was the keynote speaker. (And I was really interested to find out.) He explained that he never watches television but had been visiting his parents who happened to have on CNN's "Reliable Sources." And he heard this person say that "the Children of Israel and the Land of Israel are one and they only exist because of each other; it is G-d given." He said those words specifically caused him to ask me to speak. He said those words needed to be heard at Yale University by all the global professors assembled. Of course those were Rabbi Shemtov's words of the Rebbe.

Hashgachah Pratis. Helen Thomas said, "Go home." And I did. After being a Conservative rabbi for over 20 years, I traveled home. I journeyed home to my roots. And so did my family. Last year my son Adam studied at Chabad's Mayanot Yeshiva in Jerusalem and this year he is at Chabad in Morristown, New Jersey. On Sukkos he built sukkos in Guatemala on Merkos Shlichus as an emissary of the Rebbe and on Pesach he delivered matzos and conducted a seder for Jews deep inside Cuba. My daughter Shira is a student in Crown Heights at Chabad's Machon Chana and, G-d willing, she will be studying at a Chabad seminary in Montreal next year. She teaches tznius (according



L-R: The Nesenoff Family: Nancy, Shira, David and Adam.

to the laws of modesty) dance to daughters of Shluchim over the internet in 15 countries. [See the article about her work in this issue of the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter*.-Ed.] My wife and I are very proud of our children. When they are asked, "How did you become a chossid?" my children answer, "We grew up in a chassidishe home." Indeed they did; every Jew is a chossid on his way home.

I not only went home, I went to over 100 homes. I have traveled to, and spoken at, literally over 100 Chabad Houses throughout the world. I am witness to the work of the Rebbe, first hand. From the Chabad Houses of Sydney and Melbourne, Australia, to the Chabad Houses of Manchester and Liverpool, England, from the Chabad of Westmount and Montreal, Canada, to the Campus Chabad House of Santa Cruz, California, from Boca to Boston to Bellaire, from North Fulton to North Shore to Palm Beach Island, from Fairfield to Flamingo to the Friendship Circle of Livingston, New Jersey, I have been inspired and I have, boruch Hashem, inspired others as well. We all have our physical and spiritual journeys; I have been privy to the world of the Shluchim's beautiful families and the communities that they serve. I am witness to Rabbi Dovid and Mrs. Layla Slavin's unique, incredible facility, "Our Big Kitchen," in Sydney, and in Houston, Rabbi Lazer and Mrs. Rochel Lazaroff's "Aishel House" for those with loved ones in the hospital.

And when walking on Shabbos afternoon with the young children of Rabbi Tzvi and Mrs. Chanie Backman, the Shluchim of Tufts University, I learned even more about Chabad. We passed the window of the school's Student Center and waved to two Jewish students who had been at the previous night's Shabbos dinner. They were now doing work on their computers. The Backmans' tiny daughter looked up at me, to reassure me, and whispered, "They don't know about muktza and Shabbos yet, but don't worry, they will learn." The Rebbe's chassidim are only as authentic as their children, and their children are the real thing.

And so I travel from Chabad House to Chabad House and look, listen, learn and tell my story; and I also offer my conclusions about how to fight anti-Semitism. I tell my audiences that the way to fight anti-Jewish is by DOING Jewish! Do Chabad! Do Torah! Do Mitzvos! Do JLI! Do Shabbos! Do Kashrus!

As my plane arrived in New York after leaving my recent Orlando, Florida, speaking event, I read a text from the Orlando Shliach Rabbi Yanky Majesky, and tears came to my eyes:

A woman emailed my wife an hour after your wonderful presentation and asked for help to kasher her kitchen!! G-d bless you, Reb Dovid!

Hashgachah Pratis has taken me from the White House to over 100 Chabad Houses. There are 4,900 more to visit and speak at; each one brings me closer to home.■

Dr. David Nesenoff is a highly sought-after speaker for Chabad Houses throughout the world. His blended comedic and dramatic delivery is unique, incredibly powerful and hilarious. He is the recipient of the Rohr JLI Jewish Hero Award and has been a speaker at the past two JLI Retreats. Last year he spoke at the N'shei U'bnos Chabad Convention in Connecticut. He can be contacted at nesenoff@gmail.com Please visit our website, nsheichabadnewsletter.com, to view David Nesenoff's famous Helen Thomas video.

The Yid Stays Strong

By Dovid Roetter
This poem is dedicated to David Nesenoff.
April 12, 2013

The little candle in the darkness whispers its silent message
You can change the world, it says, you can be like me
With just a tiny touch, I can ignite a flame
Spreading my light and warmth all around.

Although I'm in darkness, I can see far
For my light shines much more brightly in the darkest of times
I can give to so many, without losing my glory
If anything, it adds to my name.

I'm known far and wide to be of much use
Yet in the wrong hands I take lives
It's up to me what I will do
If I must I will flicker and die

I always try to leap upwards, knowing it will put out my light
I don't care – I wish to be closer to G-d
When I am used to brighten your Shabbos
My very essence dances with joy.

I may be small and of not much help
Yet I can still stand tall and proud.
Do what it takes, darkness only strengthens you
You can shine bright if you dare.

Take my message to heart, I ask
I know you can be just like me
All it takes is the courage to stand
And shine on through the night.

You may be just one, but that's all you need
To make a difference; to be a guide in the night
I may be just a candle in the night, but I can never be extinguished
My name is Pintele Yid, you see.

People will try to suffocate me, to put me out for good
But I stay strong and do not give in, no matter how hard they try
You can change the world; you just have to believe
That one little flame can spark a fire.

Never give up, shine on, try to get closer to G-d
It will take leaps, and won't be easy, but you must never give up
I will always be here, right in your heart
Helping you leap through the dark.■