Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov

DEFIANCE in SAMARKAND



Defiance in Samarkand

Firsthand Accounts of Bukharian Jewry's Self-Sacrifice under Soviet Rule

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Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov

Translated and Adapted by
Elchonon Lesches
from the Hebrew Original
"Mesirus Nefesh shel Y'hudi Bukhara"

Edited by
Chaya Sarah Cantor

Defiance in Samarkand

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My eldest son Avraham was the "project manager," coordinating everything. He displayed enormous patience. Sending and responding to the endless texts, emails, and phone calls.

Avraham spent countless hours and nights, making sure this book would make the Bukaharian community proud – researching the stories, verifying the names on photo captions, and giving his approval to make sure this book would be a success.

My other son Yitzhak and my daughter Batya helped as well – the former arranging some of the photos, the latter proofreading and verifying that details didn't get lost in translation.

And of course, my wife Sofa, who gave me words of encouragement to not give up and who helped me make this a reality.

All of you are my pride and joy. May all of you continue in the holy legacy of your ancestors and bring them much nachas.

Above all, I wish to thank the Al-mighty, whose loving hand was seen throughout my life story and the life stories of those who appear in this book. In the merit of their devotion and self-sacrifice, may their souls shine bright, and may their memories serve to elevate the Jewish nation and the Torah.

May we merit to hear the footsteps of Moshaich, who will speedily bring us out of Exile and lead us into the Ultimate Redemption!

Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov
Elul 5780

ראה כ"ק אדמו"ר שליט"א את הספר מסירות נפש
של יהודי בוכרה וענה את ברכתו בזה הלשון:

אזכיר על הציון
לבשורות טובות בכל הנ"ל



When the original manuscript of this book was shown to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, he replied:

"I will mention it at the resting place of the Ohel for good tidings in all that you write."

בס"ד

בד"צ דק"ק שכונת קראון הייטס
Beth Din of Crown Heights

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ב"ה יום ועש"ק ו' אלול תשנ"ה

הנה הרה"ח ר' שלמה חי ניאזוב העוסק בצרכי ציבור בקרב יהודי בוכרה מוציא לאור ספר "מטבח ואורח חיים של יהודי בוכרה" ברוסית. והיות שאני מכירו בתור חסיד, ת"ח ויר"ש הנני בטוח שהספר הוא בתכלית הכשרות, וע"פ הידיעות שקבלתי מאנשים המבינים, הספר כולו מלא מוסר, יראת ואהבת ה' ודינים ומנהגים ע"פ דרכם והבנתם של יהודי בוכרה.

ואשרי חלקו, וה' יצליח דרכו, דרך התורה מתוך הרחבה בגו"ר.

בס"ד

הסכמת הרה"ג המפורסם הרב יצחק זילבר (קזנסקיי)

שמחתי לראות הספר המענין על דבר מסירות נפש של יהודי בוכארה שכתב ידידי הנכבד הרב שלמה חי ניאזוב נ"י מסמרקנד, ובפרט שהרבה שמעתי ספורים נפלאים על דבר הגדולות אשר עשה הסבא שלו ר' אליהו מני (דז'ערא) זצ"ל, שממש הציל נפשות ממות. וגם עסקתי עם הרב שלמה חי ניאזוב הרבה ע"ד עגונות, והצליח להציל קרוב לשלושים עגונות, ונסע למקומות רחוקים, ויודע אני על התלמוד תורה שהיה בביתו, ובנס ניצול. כדאי מאד שהדור הצעיר ילמד איך להתנהג בתנאים קשים, והספר הזה יתן הרבה.

ואברך המחבר הנכבד להצליח לקרב לעבודת ד'.

יצחק זילבר

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יצחק זילבר

הסכמת

הרה״ג המפורסם הרב **יעקב קאפל פסטרנק** שליט״א
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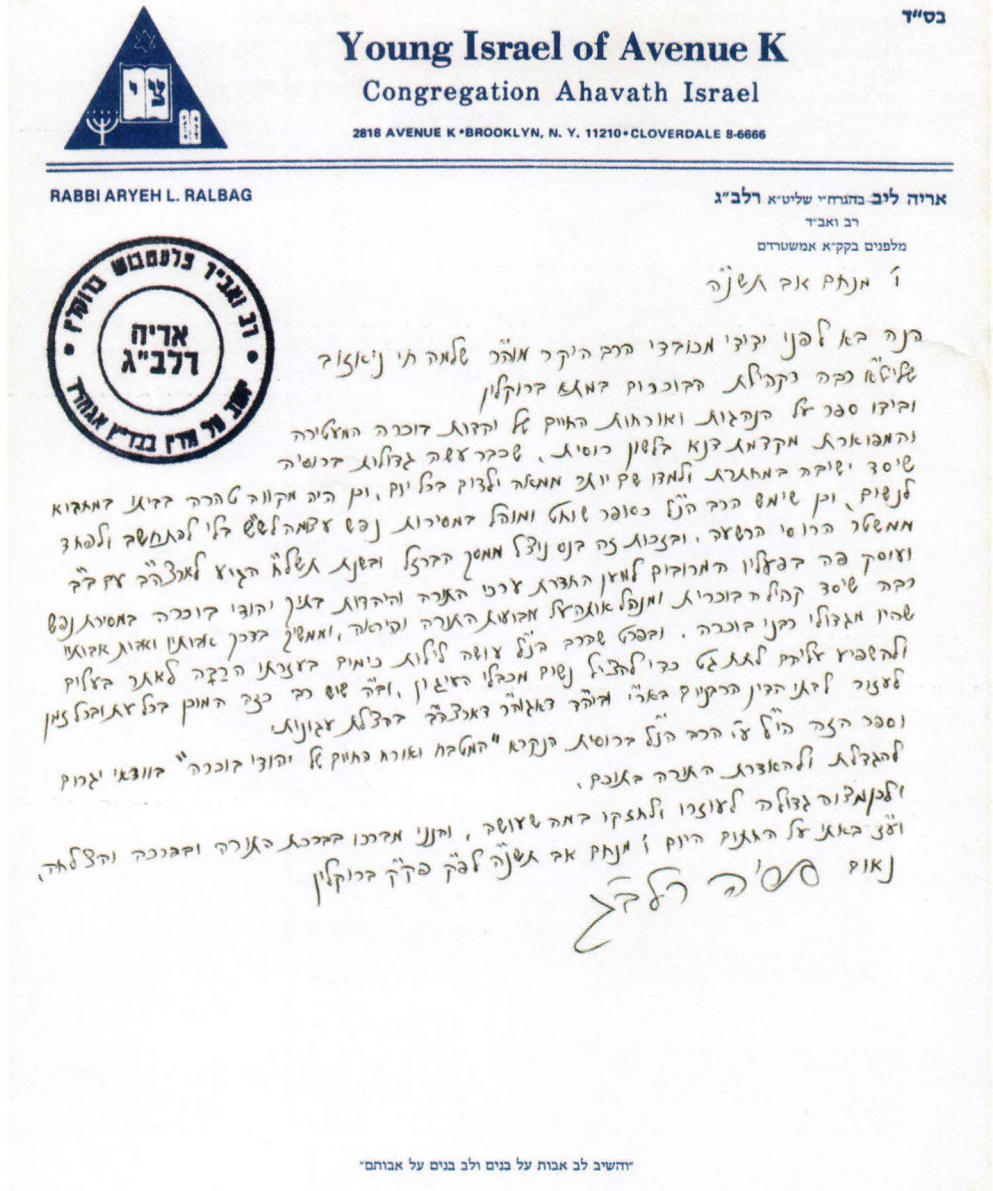
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שפודי הרב ג׳ שמחה חן נימולה שלוש״ו ואחר שקיבלתי
ועיינתי בפיקול על מלכה הודעות המובחרות בכלסוחו
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ואזן לפלפולהו על גדלותם ובבוקיהם.
שאתני אוזף שובזו לאור ספר מאירון כבוד בלומלך לשמשה
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השחיטה ונשבלת וספבלת סגיסה לוחלפו בלבושיהן
ומצבות פה ובזו אחלב הבפעלי ועובדי הלזו משפחתו
ופרי בזולבלות הבבות וסך בות-כנסת לובלפו בלבושיהו
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בלגבי-אלבפיקו הרבום כבלבבום לאולם ואיך
והנני לברך יחד משתתפיו וחולאת לפלאו ברזו ושכר חולו
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והנה עיינתי בספרו הנ"ל ודפדפתי בו קצת וראיתי כמה וכמה פעולות טובות ומס"נ שעברו על השבט היקר הזה במס"נ ממש ומהם ילמדו וכן יעשו, ויתן ה' שמהיום והלאה לא יצטרכו עמך בית ישראל למס"נ כזה בין הגוים אלא יעבדו את ה' מתוך נחת והרחבת הדעת ונפוצותינו כנס מירכתי ארץ. והרב החשוב הנ"ל יזכה לנהל עדתו לקראת משיח צדקנו מתוך שמחה ונחת.

החותם לכבוד התורה וקהילה הקדושה אנשי בוכרה בלו"נ,

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לידידי, היקר והחביב הרב הגאון שלמה תייב ניצוה,
שמחתי מאוד לשמוע שעושים לך אסיפה לרגל מלאת
לך חמשים שנה.
כפי הידוע שאנשים כאלו ניתן שלהם כזה הפעולות
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שנות פעולות הרבות, וכפי שכתבתי להביא
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ז שיק "ל אדר ב' תשנ"ה
February 18, 1995

I hereby testify that I have known Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov as a Talmid Chacham and yereh shamaim with exceptional midot tovot and good deeds.

I have also read his work, Sefer Mesirat Nefesh Shel Yehudei Buchara. He is worthy of praise and is distinguished through his Torah.

Being aware of the importance of his work and of the qualities of its author, I endorse and confer my blessing to him, that the Almighty grant him success to uplift the honor of Torah.

יישר כוחו לאורייתא כה יזכה וכה יוסיף לעבוד את הבורא, ובזכותו בקר אומתנו יבוקו מעיינותיו חוצה תצא ואמתך עלה ובצלת.

With the blessing of the Torah,

Shlomo Haviv

Rabbi Shlomo Haviv

בסד

אגודת הרבנים הספרדים
Association of Sephardic Rabbis
144-35 71st Road, Flushing, N.Y. 11367 Telephone: 718-793-2886

הנני להמליץ בזה על הספר "המטבח ואורח חיים של יהודי בוכרה"י שחבר הרב שלמה חי ניאזוב שליט"א. הספר חשוב מאד ויכולים ללמוד ממנו הלכות ע"פ לשונם והבנתם של אחינו הספרדים יהודי בוכרה, ובפרט שבזמן האחרון מגיעים הרבה עולים חדשים ממדינות ברית המועצות לשעבר. הספר הזה יעודד אותם לצעד הראשון של התקרבותם ליהדות האמיתית. ואע"פ שאין אני מכיר שפתם, אבל היות שאני מכיר היטב את המחבר שהוא חבר באגודת הרבנים הספרדים, והוא ת"ח ירא ה' מרבים ובקי בש"ס ובפוסקים וכן כבר התמחי גברא בספרו החשוב "מסירות נפש של יהודי בוכרה"י, ויישר חילי לאורייתא, וברכתו כבר אמורה יפוצו מעיינותיך חוצה וחפץ ה' בידו יצליח,

הרב אליהו בן-חיים (אב בית דין)

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ב"ה

בין כסה לעשור" התשנ"ו

ברכת יקיר

קיבלתי מכל התמיכות ומכל האהבה, אך נזעזעתי לקריאתו של יקירי ומנורתי, מצבה הנדיבה, כך פעלית לתורה ולמצוות, אשר ומאת ה' היטיב אותנו והעמוד בר לרגלון, נבקש של אחינו היקרים קהילת יהודי בוכארה ברוקלין תע"ו, הרב ר' שלמה חי ניאזוב שליט"א. שזקשני להמליץ על ספרו "המסורת ואורח החיים של יהודי בוכארה", אשר זו מהדיר ולשון בצה את המנהגים, הלכות ומלכות המסורת בעשר של יהודי בוכארה ת"ו.

על-כן הנני מזדרז מהדר לך את היד במאחר במילי דבוכה — כי מלילה לי לעמוק במקום שזקנים אשר לבקש נאה ולבקש נאה לשבחו את הפשבחות — ומי יתן שיפוצו מעיינותיו חוצה ונדיבים יהיו לאורו, ובכל אשר יפנה ישכיל ויצליח, ויכבה לזרוק על המשמר מסיק ברוחו את אותנה ובזרועו מלעיל לעומק ימים ושלים, אמן!

ואת אחי עלי רוסיה יהודי הוכבה וספרותיה אנכי מזדקק, להיות לשמחת ולשמחת-סמך ולהדיוט בוכבה על מתיבתך, ולכבוש את הספר הצה ולאור עולה ובריות נדיבה, ויתקיים ובך ישבה "בדעת בוכבה תלי ויתק".

בברכת חתימה טובה
הנזק לכבוד תורתנו הקדושה
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ו' אדר תשנ"ה

Tuesday 28 February 1995

To: Acheinu B'nei Yisroel, שליט"א

It is with reverence and admiration that I speak of an individual whose actions, work and deeds on behalf of the Buchara community are his entire being.

Rabbi Shlomo Niazov shlita himself from Buchara, is the Rav of Congrigation L'Ma'an Achai L'Yotzei Buchara, has devoted his entire life to instill Yiddishkeit to the members of his community, be it Shabbos, Kashrus, Taharas Hamishpacha, placing the children in Yeshivas, the physical and emotional welfare and well being of the parents and much more.

All of it is done in accordence to Da'as torah as was received from their forfathers Al Pi Derech Ba'al Shulchan Aruch and the Rambam.

My heartfelt blessings are given that he should be able to continue his Avodas Hakodesh with much success through peace and tranquility untill the true Redimer Ben David will appear still in our days, Amen

משה ויקהל

Rabbi Yisoscher Gelbman, M'nahel Ruchni

ישעי' גלבמן

מכתב כ"ק מרן אדמו"ר מדעעש שליט"א

Rabbi E. ALTER PANETH
Grand Rabbi of DEISH
1415 41 st. B'KLYN N. Y. 11218

אלימלך אלטר מאנעט
בהגה"ק מהר"י זצ"ל
מדעעש
וחתן הגה"ק מהרי"ד מראלהא

בס"ד

ד' לס' אלה החקים אשר צוה ד' תשע"ה לפ"ק

הנני בזה להמליץ בעד ידידי הרב היקר והנכבד איש חי ורב פעלים וכו' כמוה"ר שלמה חי נאווב שליט"א אשר הנהו עסקן נמרץ לתורה ויהדות למען עולי רוסיא בפסג"מ וזה כמה שנים שהנני מכירו אשר עוסק עמהם בלי ליאות וכל מגמתו לטובתם להגדיל תורה ולהאדירה. ועי"ז הנהו מדפיס ועולה ספר מדריך כמו קיש"ע להם סדר החיים של כל ימות השנה בדרך התורה ויראה. והוא דבר נחוץ ומופלא מאד לכל אוי"א שידעו דרך החיים ויוכלו לשמור דרך התה"ק כפי מסורת אבותיהם אשר זה כמה דורות שהיו נקצצו מהם ע"י הרשעים האכזריים ממשלת רוסיא - הגם שאין אני מבין לשונם, אבל כאשר הנני מכירו אישיות זה ומן כבר אוקי גברא אחזוקתי ובטח לא יוציא מתחת ידו דבר שאינו מתוקן וזכות התה"ק ומסירת נפש יגן בעדו ובעד כב"ב ולכל הנלוים להנצל מכל עקתן ומרעין בישין ולהושיע בכל ענינים לטובה עדי נוכה במהרה לישועתו ושמחתו של כלל ישראל ע"י ביאת משיח צדקנו בב"א הכו"ח למען כבוד התה"ק

ה"ק אלימלך אלטר פאנעט בהרהגה"ק מהריוצ"ל מדעעש



Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov receiving
Kos Shel Brachah from the Rebbe

In Isolation

Since time immemorial, the mystery of the Silk Road has mesmerized travelers, conjuring up images of caravans from east to west, laden with spices, sweets, and treasures. Kings and adventurers alike were linked with this remarkable region. The sapphire hues of domes and minarets towered over the city squares.

Since the 6th century BCE Bukhara had been one of the main centers of world civilizations. Famed for its commerce, scholarship, and culture – cosmopolitan in the truest sense of the word – Bukhara was part of the Persian Empire for quite a long time.

Historians have good reason to believe that Bukhara was the first major city in Uzbekistan where Jews put down roots, only later resettling in other regional cities. Bukharian Jews were so named because they were originally based in Bukhara – even though linguistically they more closely resembled the Jews of Iran, adopting a Persian dialect and using the *alef-beit* to write books and poems.

This vast oasis within Central Asia included the cities of Samarkand and Tashkent. Historically these Jews did well for themselves. They excelled as craftsmen and traders. Some claimed to be descendants of the Ten Tribes driven out of Eretz Yisrael by the Assyrians in the 8th century BCE; although remnants of a two-thousand-year-old synagogue were discovered, the precise date of their arrival on Bukharian soil remains lost to the mists of antiquity.

Bukhara's Jews did brisk business with China, India, and Asia Minor. Travelers spent days negotiating prices for the ceramics and silk rugs that made Samarkand famous. Many of the Jews worked as jewelry makers, goldsmiths, silversmiths, weavers, tailors, and yarn dyers.

Decline and Renewal

But, as is often the case, this calm and prosperity was not fated to last. Beginning in 791 CE, amid the emergence of Islam, Persia's Shia dynasty isolated Bukhara's Jews to the point of oppression. They were permitted to dwell in three neighborhoods only; their shops had to be built lower than the Muslims'. Ensuing generations were doomed to live as outcasts.

Despite these restrictions, Jewish merchants maintained a lucrative trade; their women became known for their elaborate embroidery in gold thread. Nevertheless, the general neglect left a tragic mark. Their magnificent synagogue, used steadily for hundreds of years, began to crumble, along with the rest of the religious infrastructure. Illiteracy was rampant.

The centuries of insularity led to further erosion in spiritual life. In addition, the community lacked a strong religious leader. When, in the late seventeenth century, Sephardic Chacham Yosef Maimon arrived in Bukhara, he found the Judaism nearing a state of decadence. The majority of Torah scrolls had fallen apart from disuse. To combat the widespread ignorance of fundamental Jewish law, the Chacham opened a yeshiva and persuaded the community to switch to Sephardic liturgy. He worked singlehandedly for thirty years until his passing; his efforts completely transformed the Jewish community.

In 1785 the Emirate of Bukhara was officially created and ruled by Muslim chiefs, Emirs. In 1843 the local Emir agreed to sell a large tract of land to the Jewish community, which nicknamed it *machla* ("the neighborhood"). Led by the distinguished Rabbi *Mullah* (a religious teacher or leader) Binyamin Fuzaylov, Bukhara's Jew's were finally able to restructure a communal life. In a move that bespoke both greatness and humility, Rabbi Fuzaylov refused payment for his role as the local Chacham; instead, he continued working as a silk dyer. Even when pressed to sign a document in his rabbinical capacity he simply wrote *Binyamin the Shochet.*

The community built many beautiful synagogues, alongside which were *chadorim* for children to learn *alef-beit.* Older

children studied *Chumash* and Rashi – translated into Bukharian – and *Ein Yaakov*, the compilation of Talmudic lore. As in times of antiquity, the teacher sat on a pile of pillows in the center of the room, his pupils circled around him. Much later, when modernity crept in, both teacher and pupil began sitting on benches. Once a child reached his teenage years, he left to pursue a craft or trade.

Local *shochtim*, kosher slaughterers, worked behind the synagogues. Every day, outside the stalls, long lines of women and girls carried live fowl for slaughter. The community had a *rosh hakahal*, an honorific title for the chief congregational officer who met with government officials and served as liaison. Typical of Jewish communities the world over, Bukhara's synagogues were comprised of merchants, scholars, tradesman, rich, and poor. Yet, no matter their socioeconomic or spiritual station, they were deeply pious. This fervor intensified later when Bukharian Jewry began making Aliyah.



Children learning Torah in Samarkand

Change of Rule

In 1868, the Emirate lost a war with Imperial Russia, which had colonial aspirations in the region. Russia annexed much of the Emirate's territory, including Samarkand. In 1873 the remainder became a Russian protectorate and was soon surrounded by the Governorate-General of Turkestan.

After generations of Islamic oppression – including forced conversions – Czarist Russia seemed understandably good to the Jews of Bukhara. Life, at first, became easier. As a "regular" ethnic group, Jews now lived wherever they pleased. Discriminatory edicts were cancelled, the Jews' tax burden reduced. They built new synagogues, amassing fortunes as they traded in Russian goods.

When the Emir of Bukhara continued to harass his Jewish population, a mass exodus took place: Jews left Bukhara for Samarkand, Tashkent, and other Turkestan cities, all of which now lay under Czarist rule. In the growing trade wars, Ashkenazic Jews began to arrive, significantly increasing the overall Jewish presence in the region.

Then the steam locomotive made its appearance. Russia was in need of massive transportation systems, and the Turkestan region, with its long, flat stretches of land and broad steppes, made the ideal backdrop. The railroad began crisscrossing the great country, helping to bring food grown in the south – home of the agricultural colonies – to the less fertile north. Russia's railway became a gigantic network linking all parts of the country, as steam-belching trains replaced wagon drivers.

The construction of the Trans-Caspian railroad ended for good the isolation of Bukharian Jewry. Cutting through Samarkand, Bukhara, and Tashkent, it linked for the first time these three largest communities with their European brethren. On their part, Ashkenazic Jewry began to immigrate to Bukhara in the hopes of finding a less restrictive lifestyle and policy. In 1905, following a wave of pogroms in major Russian cities, Jewish immigrants flooded into the region.

The railroad was a mixed blessing. With it came inexpensive factory textiles, which drove prosperous Jewish traders into bankruptcy. Nevertheless, it enabled Bukharian Jewry to begin making Aliyah. Fired with enthusiasm, they left behind comfort and wealth in order to fulfill lifelong dreams of dwelling in the Holy Land. Confronting cramped conditions within the Old City, the community assertively moved out of its confines and established the Rehovot quarter, considered then as one of the most magnificent in Jerusalem. Within a decade, almost ten percent moved to the Bukharian quarter of Jerusalem, where they would form the nucleus of the much larger contingency of arrivals. Approximately two thousand Jews followed this route until the borders slammed shut in 1914, with the outbreak of World War One, and Russia and Turkey on opposite sides. A second wave of thousands managed to emigrate between the World Wars.

Beginning in the 1890s, Bukharian immigrants purchased land; hiring an architect, they designed a neighborhood in the style of major European cities, sporting streets three times wider than others in Jerusalem. Spacious mansions opened onto large courtyards paved with tiled roofs, Italian marble, and facades with Hebrew inscriptions. This area later came to be known as the *Shkunat ha-Bukharim,* "Bukharian Quarter."

Valley of Tears

Following the Communist Revolution of 1917, civil war erupted between the Red Army – the Bolsheviks – and the White Army – those loyal to the Czar. Exhausted, impoverished, and dejected, many Bukharian Jews began to favor a Bolshevik takeover, in spite of the latter's open atheism. Centuries of persecution under the local Muslims, and then the Czar, led to this opinion, which, in turn, led to even greater persecution under the Muslims. Numerous riots broke out.

After it was besieged by the Red Army, and the last Emir deposed in 1920, Bukhara remained semi-independent. Then, in 1925, it became incorporated into the Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan. Tashkent, which in 1930 became the Uzbek capital, transformed into a major city, with Samarkand not far behind. The Soviets began to settle Jewish workers on collective farms – *kolkhozes* – in Uzbekistan. However, the Soviets also sealed the international borders, ending the trade that served as the lifeblood of Bukhara's Jews.

Despite these setbacks, the Jews of Bukhara were rewarded for their support of the Soviet takeover. For several years they enjoyed relative calm and autonomy. This tolerance – coming at a time when religious repression swept through the Soviet Union – worked to create an enclave that defied logic. Jews in Bukhara were able to learn Torah, keep mitzvoth, and attend synagogue and religious functions – while elsewhere, in the very same country ruled by the very same government, fellow Jews were being killed or incarcerated for these selfsame actions! This dual policy prompted some of the most revered



GPU – OGPU – NKVD-KGB building – 2 Bolshaya Lubyanka Street

Chabad Chassidic families to flee Central Russia and relocate to Tashkent and Samarkand.

Sadly, this situation did not last long. The religious repression that had turned the Soviet heartland into a valley of tears eventually reached Bukhara as well. The Revolution might have promised to uproot the past, but certain institutions remained, namely the Russian secret police. The Cheka, as it was known under the Czars, became in 1922 the NKVD, the "People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs." (In 1955 it became the KGB.) The NKVD's "State Political Directorate" – the GPU – created a special "Jewish section," the *Yevreskaya Sektzia* (*Yevsektzia* for short), which instigated numerous anti-religious activities. Its members were militantly secular Jews, some of whom had even come from traditional homes. They spoke Yiddish and even knew some Jewish lore and liturgy. Now violently rejecting their past, they collaborated with their Soviet overlords. Their intended creation of the "Soviet man," a proud citizen who would subsume all other interests in the name of a proletariat paradise, ran counter to all Torah ideals.

Sadly, some Bukharian Jews did embrace Communism, which promised universal citizenship, economic equality, and the end of anti-Semitism – on paper, anyway. Little did they realize the evil it would eventually bring to their own heritage.

Dark Ages

Thus began a dark time for Bukharian Jewry. Thousands of the wealthy were murdered, imprisoned, or denounced, prompting many fellow community members to flee illegally via Iran or Afghanistan. During leader Josef Stalin's infamous purges of 1936-1938 ("The Great Terror"), thousands dreaded the knocks on the doors in the middle of the night and the interrogations for "counter-revolutionary activities" that landed them in the gulag, the archipelago of labor camps in Siberia.

The repression affected the Chabad families there as well, since religious study and practice became criminalized.

Nevertheless, building on the phenomenal success of earlier Chabad emissaries – notably Rabbis Shlomo Leib Eliezrov, Avraham Chaim Na'eh, and Simcha Gorodetsky – the influx of great Chassidim completely reshaped Judaism in our area. They provided schools, *mikvaot* (ritual pools), *shechita* (kosher slaughter), Jewish books, and kosher food. In addition, Bukharian Jews and Chabad Chassidim worked together to build the infrastructure that provided shelter for the influx of refugees from Poland, the Baltic States, and elsewhere following World War Two and the Nazi invasion of western Russia.

For the next forty years, the USSR fluctuated in level of repression. During 1944-1947, which encompassed the late war and the chaos of refugee relocation and repatriation, many foreign Jews took advantage of the opportunity to either return to Poland or escape elsewhere. Then the "Iron Curtain," as British Prime Minister Winston Churchill called Communist Europe, came crashing down under an increasingly paranoid Stalin, who reinstated his reign of terror. Following Stalin's death, new Communist Party chief Nikita Khrushchev ushered in a brief respite, as Stalin's crimes were denounced and thousands of gulag prisoners were released, among them my grandfather and other Chabad Chassidim. During the "Khrushchev Thaw" of the 1950s and early 1960s, Soviet life in general became slightly more relaxed, and economic and cultural reforms were introduced. All this ended in the 1960s and 1970s: under Leonid Brezhnev, the climate once again turned dire for Soviet Jews, who would not begin to see religious freedom until Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*, openness, in the 1980s.

During all these years Chabad Chassidim retained influence, through a tightknit underground. Yet, though many of their descendants have written fascinating accounts about their experiences in Tashkent and Samarkand, little has been written about the struggles of local Bukharian Jewry under ever-worsening religious conditions and almost daily oppression.

I feel fortunate to have been raised in that historical period – to have witnessed and heard the everyday sacrifices our people made to keep the embers of Yiddishkeit burning under Stalinist rule.

Originally, when I authored this book in Hebrew, I notified the Rebbe that I was working to have it published and released. (The Rebbe requested an advance copy to review and to ensure that its publication would not harm anyone still living in Russia.) Some of these narratives overlap, as these Chassidim and Bukharian Jews, who shared experiences and encounters with the same villains, frequently crossed paths and reappear in various other accounts. Nevertheless, they form a cohesive whole – one massive tale of courage, self-sacrifice, and holiness throughout a brutal twentieth century. The lives of these unsung heroes deserve a place on our bookshelves and a special place in our hearts.

Part
ONE

Chapter
ONE

MASTER TRANSLATOR

In the early nineteenth century, a scholar known as Chacham Eliyahu became the master *sofer* of Bukhara. He wrote a staggering amount of *sifrei* Torah, completing over fifty in his lifetime.

His arrival in Bukhara was not unusual. He had originally intended to collect money for the impoverished community of Tzfat (Safed), but was persuaded by Bukhara's then leading rabbi to stay and raise the area's level of Torah observance. Chacham Eliyahu acquiesced and remained in Bukhara for the rest of his life.



Chacham Shimon

His son, Chacham Shimon, was blessed with many unusual talents. He possessed a melodious voice and composed many poems and songs. An intellectual giant, he translated religious texts into the vernacular, thereby making them accessible to the greater public. In

truth Chacham Shimon had but a few goals in life: study Torah, transcribe his insights, and translate as many *sefarim* as possible.

However, his life was beset by tragedy. He and his wife suffered the deaths of eight out of ten children in infancy. Later, their son Pinchas died at the age of eighteen. Their remaining child, a daughter Sarah, became the light of their lives, their sole consolation following all the horrendous losses. On his part, Chacham Shimon withdrew from many of his communal obligations, finding refuge in his prodigious learning and output.

Even in later years, Chacham Shimon shrugged off the advance of old age and continued translating many liturgical works for the Bukharian community – among them *Shir Hashirim*, the Haggadah, *Targum Sheni* on Megillas Esther, and *Likuttei Dinim* (a work on Jewish law). When deciding which *seforim* to translate, he took special care to select only those that would bring religious pride to Bukharian Jewry. Although other *sefarim*



Several of many Bukharian rabbis who served as leaders of their communities

already existed in translation, the previous translators – unfamiliar with the local dialect – had mixed Bukharian with scholarly Persian, making local comprehension difficult. Chacham Shimon, in contrast, rendered these *sefarim* in a style both interesting and relevant to his audience. Little wonder they became extremely popular.

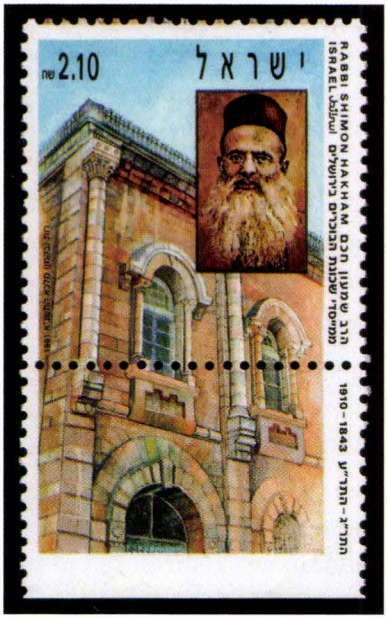
The output was so great that the Chacham Shimon became accredited for unlocking the gates to many fundamental texts for even the simplest of Jews, enabling them at last to study. He is also accredited for preserving the Bukharian-Jewish dialect; his books graced the shelves of every Jewish home in the country.

Enigmatic Sculpture

In the year 1890, Chacham Shimon took leave of the beloved brethren in his adopted community. He returned to spend his remaining years in Eretz Yisrael, in the Bukharian section of Jerusalem.



A sample of Chacham Shimon's transliteration. Using Hebrew letters the Bukharian Jews were able to read and understand the Torah in their own native language.



A commemorative stamp honoring Chacham Shimon

A fascinating episode, one that would bring the Chacham international fame, occurred in 1902, after his return to Israel: a unique sculpture was delivered from Paris to his door. It was a vessel archaeologists had unearthed, appearing to be thousands of years old. Shaped like a human femur and covered in an ancient variant of Phoenician script, the discovery piqued worldwide interest. It had been purchased by the famed Rothschilds, who embarked on a mission to unlock its secrets, and sent to various experts, all of whom spent considerable time analyzing the writing – but to no avail. Much time passed and much money spent, but no one possessed the necessary skills.

The Rothschilds, hearing about the prolific scholar in Bukhara, had the artifact sent to Chacham Shimon. Incredibly, he spent a mere few days inspecting the "femur" before announcing his discovery.

"When our forefather Avraham wanted his servant to fulfill something of magnitude, his servant was asked to place his hand on Avraham's thigh and take a vow," he explained.

"Based on this, the ancients shaped valuable documents to resemble the human femur, in recognition of our forefather. This artifact is a document of sale, obviously of some importance, and the writing spells out the details of the transaction."

His explanation, validated by other scholars, brought him prominence. A rabbi in a remote neighborhood had succeeded

where leading experts had failed! For his efforts the Rothschilds paid him handsomely.

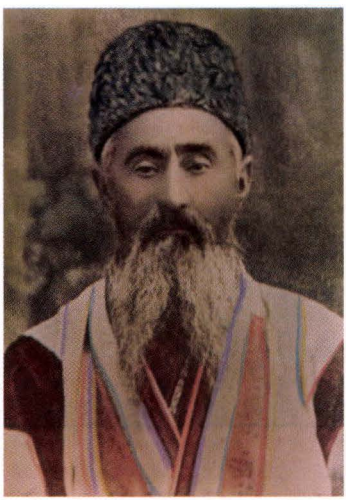
Chacham Shimon passed away in 1910, in the middle of translating the Book of Isaiah. A street was named after him; later a commemorative stamp was issued by the State of Israel. It is difficult to estimate the amount of lives affected by this saintly figure; his memory is revered to this day.

"With a Steady Hand"

Another towering figure of that era was Rabbi Chezkiya Cohen Rabin. I would like to describe this great leader and scholar in more detail.

Rabbi Chezkiya was a mere twenty-four when his father passed away. Although the latter had left instructions in his will that his son be appointed in his stead, many in the community balked at the idea of having a youngster fill such an important post. Infighting resulted, to such an extent that word reached the leading rabbis in far-off Jerusalem.

A temporary stalemate was reached. Rabbi Chezkiya began filling his father's position – but in an unofficial capacity. A short time passed before the community realized the error of their ways: Rabbi Chezkiya proved himself as a true scholar far beyond his years, particularly in the laws of *gittin,* divorce.



Rabbi Chezkiya Cohen Rabin

Rabbi Chezkiya ran a yeshiva and Beth Din in his home. He agreed to preside in judgment only when both parties were Jewish. (If one was Muslim, the case was sent to the local Cadi.) Author of *Mazkeres Gittin,* a compendium on the laws of divorce, he exhorted the community to support their brethren in the

newly established Bukharian neighborhood in Jerusalem. He even made the journey to Eretz Yisrael himself – visiting Tiberias, Chevron, Tzfat, and Jerusalem.

In the upheaval of the Communist revolution, Rabbi Chezkiya was unique in maintaining his position in Bukhara throughout that turbulent period. The authorities, recognizing his judgments, allowed him to rule independently in deeds and sales, wills, power-of-attorney, and other commercial disputes. Nevertheless, in 1925 the Soviets formally asked him to cease his religious activities, knowing all too well the integral role he played as regional Jewish leader.

Rabbi Chezkiya did not budge. He continued teaching Torah, ruling in Jewish law, and inspiring his community. Ten years later, realizing that the Communists were plotting his arrest (and possible execution) for his "counter-revolutionary activities," he slipped away overnight and fled to Eretz Yisrael. His escape route was a horrendous experience, fraught with setbacks. It took him over three years to reach the Holy Land.

The joy of the Bukharian community in Jerusalem knew no bounds, as they welcomed this great scholar into their midst. Rabbi Chezkiya founded a yeshiva, improved the standards of *shechita,* joined the local Beth Din, studied in the yeshiva of Kabbalists, and elevated the religious standing of his community on many fronts.

Rabbi Chezkiya died in 1945. As the last Chief Rabbi of Bukhara, he represented the last link in the golden chain of rabbis for the Jews of Central Asia, a powerful leader who raised religious awareness while guiding the community with a steady hand.

Chapter
TWO

EARLIEST INTERVENTION

The earliest Chabad presence in our region began in 1890, when Shlomo Leib Eliezrov, Rabbi of Chevron, arrived. The purpose of his trip was to raise funds for his community in Eretz Yisrael, but at the sight of the spiritual neglect in Bukhara, he undertook the repair of the local *mikvaot* and provision of kosher meat for the residents of Samarkand, Tashkent, and the environs.

Rabbi Eliezrov had been recruited and encouraged by none other than Rabbi Sholom DovBer Schneersohn – the Rebbe Rashab, the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe. The two were related: Rabbi Eliezrov traced his lineage back to Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the Ba'al HaTanya and first Lubavitcher Rebbe (also known as the "Alter Rebbe"). The Rebbe Rashab had long desired to send a *shaliach,* emissary, to Bukhara's Jewish community, whose Torah observance, in spite of the earlier contributions of Chacham Eliyahu and his son Chacham Shimon, had greatly declined. So ardent was the Rebbe Rashab that while vacationing at a spa, he penned an impassioned letter to his son, bemoaning the state of Bukhara's Jews: "This situation weighs on my mind day and night. I am sorely troubled at my inability to



The Rebbe Rashab

help strengthen the religious standards in that region."

The Rebbe Rashab was not the first of the Chabad dynasty to be preoccupied with strengthening Yiddishkeit for brethren in faraway lands. His predecessors had also sent *shluchim* to gauge and bring back word of communal involvement. Yet, due to its extreme remoteness and insularity, Bukhara had never received such visitors. Now, thanks to the vision of the Rebbe Rashab, Jews there would welcome those sent to teach them Torah and elevate religious standards.

In a way, Bukharian Jews enjoyed special attention from the Rebbe. In spite of general decline, they retained a unique piety and reverence toward Torah scholars. This combination provided fertile ground for the Rebbe Rashab. "At their inner core," he wrote, "Bukharian Jewry are like rich soil, waiting to accept spiritual planting." After a lengthy exchange of letters between the Rebbe and contacts in Bukhara, the former laid the framework for future religious activity. He was particularly interested in boosting the level of *chadorim*, elementary schools, as well as commerce for the impoverished community.

Local Jews, impressed at the nonstop scholarship and kindnesses, asked Rabbi Eliezrov to accept a post in Samarkand. Not only did he agree, he spent close to the next thirty years of his life traveling back and forth between his family in Chevron and his community in Bukhara. His contract with the community was endorsed by the era's greatest rabbis in the Holy Land, who encouraged him to lead in line with Sephardic customs – i.e. rulings of the Beit Yosef. These men were well acquainted with Rabbi Eliezrov, who in his youth had studied with scholars like

Rabbi Eliyahu Mani, Chief Rabbi of Chevron who was a mentor and colleague of the Ben Ish Chai..



Rabbi Yosef Haim, known as the Ben Ish Chai

Nevertheless, Rabbi Eliezrov had difficulty acclimating to the culture of Samarkand. Everything was different – language, customs, mannerisms, mentality. Dwelling alone, apart from his far off family in Chevron, only exacerbated this difficulty. A lesser man might have despaired but, as a Chassid and man of conviction, Rabbi Eliezrov forged ahead, earning communal trust and respect.

He worked diligently to master the local language, enhancing his ability to reach a much wider audience with his Torah classes and speeches. He donned the local garb. Teaching and mentoring filled all hours of his day. Somehow he found time for everyone. Rabbi Eliezrov exuded an aura of sanctity and endearment; people were drawn to him as metal to a magnet, and his door remained open to a steady stream of students, homemakers, businessmen, rabbis, and scholars. So great was his piety that people believed he studied with Elijah the Prophet.

The work was daunting. In a telling letter to a relative, Rabbi Eliezrov wrote, "Had I known the difficulties beforehand, I would have never accepted the position, but now that this communal responsibility rests on my shoulders, I will not leave." Like a master builder who patiently restores a crumbling edifice, Rabbi Eliezrov bolstered every facet of Jewish life in a manner impacting many future generations.

One particularly moving incident demonstrated the rabbi's blend of sagacity and wit. A father whose children had all died young approached him, broken and needy of guidance. Doctors had despaired of the couple's chance of ever having healthy offspring; could the Rav perform a miracle?

"Make the commitment to let your beard grow," Rabbi Eliezrov advised. "When young children stick their hands into their

father's beard and start playing, this is a *segulah,* charm, for long life."

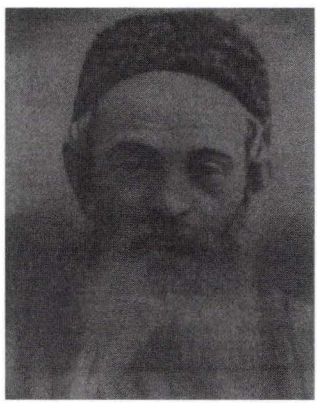
Wonderstruck, the father began growing his beard. All his children born later lived long, healthy lives.

Opposition

Not everyone loved their new rabbi. As part of the religious renaissance, he also revamped the standards of *shechita.* Vexed at the inadequacy of local slaughterers, he took the dramatic step of rendering *all* slaughter invalid – unless the slaughterers had their knives inspected by him personally and they prepared to be thoroughly retested on the pertinent laws.

The slaughterers raised a hue and cry throughout the city. They sent scathing letters to the rabbis in the Holy Land, but the latter, having already been notified by Rabbi Eliezrov, supported his efforts. Undeterred, the slaughterers then did the unthinkable: they approached the Emir, and asked him to have the rabbi cast into prison for fomenting dissension within the community.

Soon, a platoon of royal guards came to arrest Rabbi Eliezrov and led him to the palace. He accompanied them calmly. As soon as the rabbi entered the throne room, the Emir, gazing at his saintly persona, rose, crossed the hall, and hugged him tightly.



Rabbi Shlomo Eliezrov

"When I saw your holy features, I became confused," the Emir said. "How could these Jews have the audacity to accuse *you* of corruption and controversy? I will have *them* imprisoned instead."

Rabbi Eliezrov spoke in a calm, steady voice. He explained the reason for his actions and his dedication to the restoration of authentic Jewish tradition. He concluded by

respectfully asking that the lives of his antagonists be spared. The Emir sent him home in great honor, promising to do as the rabbi requested.

But Rabbi Eliezrov's woes did not end there. Smarting at their humiliation, a group of *shochtim* plotted to actually kill the rabbi! A few days later, as Rabbi Eliezrov presided over a festive meal honoring the parent of a community member, a steaming plate of meat stew was placed on the table right in front of him.

"Please bring in a stray dog from outside," he commanded. He then fed the stew. To the horror of all the guests, the dog raised an unearthly howl, keeled over, and died.

Details of this story spread throughout the city, bringing Rabbi Eliezrov new respect as a wonderworker. Similar incidents earned him the title Baal Shem Tov of Bukhara. Jew and non-Jew alike bowed aside wherever he went. On their part, the old cadre of *shochtim* admitted defeat and never again tried to harm him.

Rabbi Eliezrov then authored a treatise on the laws of *shechita* and began teaching his students. He designed and oversaw the



Gravesite of Rabbi Eliyahu Mani and his wife Samra in the ancient Jewish cemetery in Hebron.

construction of a new slaughterhouse, one that would streamline the slaughtering process and eliminate the legal complications prevalent in the previous slaughterhouse. He found one *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) – only one! – whom he trusted well enough to assign the task of raising the younger generation of truly G-d-fearing *shochtim.* Thanks to his guidance, many members of the Niyazov family became expert *shochtim,* as did others who attended these tutorial lessons.

Rabbi Eliezrov also turned his attention to the plight of *agunot* in Bukhara. According to Sephardic tradition, men could take multiple wives – which led to complicated situations that devastated numerous families. Rabbi Eliezrov called for a general assembly. In a passionate speech, he read aloud from the *Shulchan Aruch,* the Code of Jewish Law, exhorting them to reject polygamy and accept the practice of monogamy among Jews worldwide. Thanks to his influence, many women were finally freed from marital shackles.

Torah-True Education

Yet, the crowning achievement was Rabbi Eliezrov's complete revitalization of authentic Jewish education. He founded a Talmud Torah with three classes, divided according to academic ability. His untiring efforts brought a level of knowledge not seen in Bukhara for many generations.

My own two grandfathers and great-uncles were fortunate to learn under his tutelage. In addition, students reviewed Tanya and celebrated the special dates of the Chabad calendar. Chassidic teachings and festivals became an integral part of their education.

Like ripples in a pond, the education Rabbi Eliezrov bequeathed expanded ever outward, setting the groundwork and generation whose dedication to Yiddishkeit reached the epitome of self-sacrifice. The ideals he infused with the warmth of Chassidus formed the nucleus of deeply pious students whose families served as the cornerstone of religious activity and

preservation even under the harshest conditions. Imprisonment, torture, harassment, starvation, and beatings – nothing could dim the fervor he implanted in these souls.



Rabbi Yosef Eliav

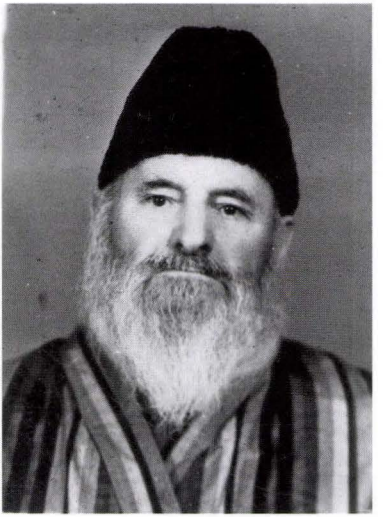
To honor their memory, I would like to mention some of the top students who learned with Rabbi Eliezrov: Rabbis Chezkiya Kaikov, Rachamim Fuzaylov, Chananya Niyazov, Meir Chai Babazhanov, Emmanuel Mlekandov, Menachem and Shlomo Eliayov, Mani Ilitz, and Gavriel Niyazov. In addition, Rabbis Nissim Kimiagrov, Eliyahu Mani and Yona Aharonov relearned the laws of *shechita* under the Rav and earned his seal of approval. Among the others who received his ordination for *shechita* were Rabbis Yaakov Niyazov, Eliyahu Mani Niyazov, Yosef Eliav, and Daniel Shakarov.

To His Defense

When the Communists introduced their atheistic fervor to Bukhara, one of their first acts was the arrest of the beloved Rabbi Eliezrov. In reaction, one day, they were startled by a volley of artillery over the city. The incensed community, working in tandem with their leaders, had set up cannons on the rooftops. Frantic telegrams soon arrived in Moscow: Bukhara's Jews were ready to wage war in defense of their beloved leader!

Community heads were summoned to the local Communist offices. Apparently Lenin himself had ordered a de-escalation.

"Our rabbi is a British citizen," one of the elders declared. "Allow him to return to the city of Chevron," now part of Mandate Palestine. And so, in 1920, Rabbi Eliezrov had no choice but to



Rabbi Daniel Shakarov

return to the Holy Land. He was escorted with great pomp by Bukhara's Jews, who sadly knew they would never see their beloved mentor again.

Those escorting Rabbi Eliezrov related miracles that occurred along the journey. Once, on a Friday, when Jews traditionally refrain from travel, the Rav exhorted his driver to continue – much to the astonishment of his fellow travelers. Suddenly, they found themselves at the border with Afghanistan, having covered an impossible distance. They realized that Rabbi Eliezrov, having sensed some sort of danger, caused *kfitzas haderech,* a shortening of the road.

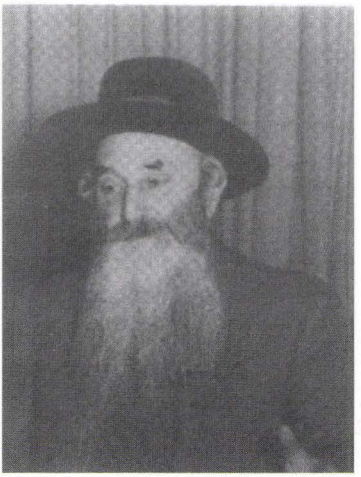
Shortly before Pesach 1921, Rabbi Eliezrov arrived in Jerusalem, where he immediately became the leading rabbi of the Bukharian quarter. This was followed by years of fruitful activity. Yet, for those remaining in Bukhara, the departure of this Torah luminary and Chassid had left behind a gaping void. None could match the devotion and success of this spiritual giant.

Chapter
THREE

THE DECISOR

Rabbi Avraham Chaim Na'eh was a towering halachic authority who lived during the first half of the twentieth century. During his relatively short life, he authored multiple acclaimed works – most famously *Ketzos ha-Shulchan* and *Shi'urei Torah* – in which he converted Biblical measurements into contemporary equivalents. The significance of his achievements cannot be overstated, as much of Jewish law and practice involves specific sizes and includes practically any religious observance – be it Kiddush on Friday night, separation of challah, or the consumption of matzah and *maror* on the Seder. Thanks to Rabbi Na'eh, Jews around the world could fulfill the mitzvoth properly.

Rabbi Na'eh was born in Eretz Yisrael. Recognizing his intellectual prowess at an early age, many Jerusalem scholars took the unusual step of opening their treasured libraries for the prodigy to peruse. His uncle, Rabbi Eliezrov, who then stood at the helm of the Bukharian community, received during one of his many travels to Lubavitch a number of time-intensive projects from the Rebbe Rashab. Fearing for the spiritual welfare of his brethren in his absence, Rabbi Eliezrov wrote to his



Rabbi Avraham Chaim Na'eh.

nephew, asking him to set out from Jerusalem and journey to Samarkand. The journey was difficult and exhausting, but "Reb Chaim" faced this newest challenge with enthusiasm.

Despite his relatively young age – he was barely twenty-one – Reb Chaim came armed with recommendations from the day's greatest scholars. Initially, he stayed at the home of the illustrious Rabbi Chezkiya Kaikov, who decided to take advantage of his guest's youth to play a trick on a group of visiting scholars from the Holy Land.

"This is my son Chaim," he said. "He is a great prodigy. Please test him on his learning; let me know whether the Holy Land produces such prodigies as well."

The scholars began to pepper the young man with questions. Overwhelmed, they turned to the host and exclaimed, "This is impossible! There is no way anyone at his age in Samarkand could have reached such proficiency. Tell us the truth! Is he really from here?"

Reb Chezkiya had no choice but to admit that young Reb Chaim was, indeed, a newly arrived scholar from Eretz Yisrael.

Chacham Chaim

Local Jewry were overjoyed when Rabbi Na'eh began to teach. Within a short time he became the head of the local Beth Din. Quickly adapting to his surroundings, he donned the local traditional garb and even adopted the surname *Mendelov.* Not content with changing his Ashkenazic family name, Rabbi Na'eh set out to learn the local language, enabling him to converse freely with his brethren.



Rabbi Avraham Chaim Na'eh wearing the traditional Bukharian garb

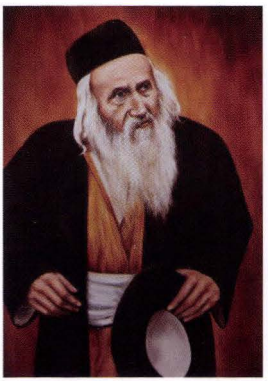
In a yet further sign of his intelligence, he mastered Bukharian within a month! He even became an expert on the spelling and grammar of the local dialect. This achievement removed any barriers between him and the community: local Jews were awed at his appreciation of their welfare and culture.

The young rabbi began to revamp local educational standards, universally raising the bar of Torah study. As the undisputed authority on the complex laws of *gittin*, he presided over all divorce cases and resolved many difficulties. In addition, he closely supervised the local *shechitah*. Many detailed letters flew back and forth between the nephew in Samarkand and the uncle still working for the Rebbe in Lubavitch.

For their part, Bukharian Jewry revered the brilliant rabbi. They literally trembled in his saintly presence. As time passed, noticing that local bar mitzvah boys were unprepared for the responsibility of donning *tefillin*, the rabbi published a booklet entitled *Chanoch Le'naar* detailing its laws – in Bukharian! This act was typical of his mindset to effect change that would raise the level of religious observance.

Given the near impossibility of printing a book in Bukhara due to the primitive conditions, Rabbi Na'eh traveled to Warsaw. However, once there, he decided to travel to Lubavitch and meet with the Rebbe Rashab.

It was there that yet another facet of his greatness became revealed. The Rebbe, so taken by the young man's piety and



Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld

erudition, offered him the position of *maggid shiur*, lecturer, in his famed Yeshivas Tomchei Tmimim. Flattered, Rabbi Na'eh quickly sat down to pen a letter to his father informing him of this incredible development. However, his father, less than thrilled, asked the Rebbe to send the young man back home to Jerusalem.

This move was not fortuitous. With World War One raging, the Ottoman authorities were expelling anyone who lacked Turkish citizenship. Rabbi Na'eh was forced to join the stream of refugees to Alexandria, Egypt. Even there, he did not rest: he opened a yeshiva attracting over two hundred students.

When the war subsided, he returned to Eretz Yisrael and served as personal secretary to the esteemed Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, rabbi and co-founder of the Edah HaChareidis in Jerusalem. Even with these many responsibilities, Bukharian Jewry remained close to Rabbi Na'eh's heart. He wrote a Hebrew calendar for them replete with Jewish laws; he moved to the Bukharian neighborhood to live with the new arrivals; and he later, once again, became their rabbi.

For the rest of his life, this Torah giant dedicated himself to aiding Bukharian Jews in the Holy Land. They in turn, remembering his prominence in Samarkand, venerated their Chacham Chaim to no end. His activism continued throughout his later years and retained a tremendous impact on his community.

Chapter
FOUR

PRAYER OF THE MAGNATE

Gold has always been used as a display of wealth and decoration. Since time immemorial, goldsmiths have handcrafted all sorts of artifacts, jewelry, and precious objects. Gold was given prominence in the design of both the Mishkan and the Beit Hamikdash.

In Bukhara, we were fortunate to know Yedidya Zargar, goldsmith extraordinaire. He was the one and only goldsmith throughout our area, and his skill became somewhat legendary. In addition to the more basic forging and smelting, Reb Yedidya mastered a wide range of advanced metalworking techniques – soldering, filing, melting, engraving, embossing, and polishing. I don't know where exactly he gained all this, although a goldsmith usually learns as a son or apprentice of a master craftsman. But leave it to say, he fashioned all types of jewelry and vessels, which attracted buyers from far and wide.

His work was in such demand that Reb Yedidya opened a factory employing many hundreds of workers, both Jews and Gentiles. He taught them goldsmith skills and paid them quite generously. Thanks to him, hundreds of families lived in great

comfort. Needless to say, he himself became both wealthy and respected.

His preoccupation with gold must have affected his character, because Reb Yedidya had a "golden" name – a sterling reputation and demeanor. Because of his kind treatment, his workers loved him as a child loves his father. Totally reliable, he was above all reproach.

Reb Yedidya endeared himself to everyone, toward whom he accorded the greatest respect – with none of the airs usually associated with the wealthy – and acted as benefactor. He freely lent people whatever money they needed, and always with a smile. It was common to find a line stretched outside his door of those who had fallen on hard times; they knew they would never be turned away empty-handed. His pureness of heart left a deep impression on all who met him.

The concept of lending money interest-free is integral to our Jewish tradition. Borrowing from a bank simply never crossed our minds; loans were issued within our tightknit community.



Reb Zrubavel Niyazov (left) and Reb Mishael, son of Reb Yedidya Zargarov (right)

Once a borrower felt sufficiently established, and able to repay the loan, he felt naturally ready to lend money to others, as well. This mutual assistance remains central to the secret of success and stability behind Bukharian Jewry and their financial dealings. Reb Yedidya outdid everyone with his easygoing manner and complete faith in every borrower.

Drastic Measures

One unusual occurrence highlighted Reb Yedidya's unique character. A certain Gentile who for many years had served as middleman – buying Reb Yedidya's wares in bulk and then selling them around the country – approached the magnate for a large loan. As was his custom, Reb Yedidya gave him the money immediately, without securing any form of documentation or collateral. He trusted everyone.

Time passed. Realizing something was amiss, Reb Yedidya began to worry. Not only did the borrower fail to return the money, he ceased coming to the city altogether – thereby avoiding any chance of running into his benefactor. Faced with no alternative, Red Yedidya sent some of his workers to the home of the borrower to demand repayment. But the latter laughed them off, insisting that Reb Yedidya must be mistaken.

"There was no loan," he answered repeatedly. "I never asked him for money."

More time passed. Soon, it was over a half year since Reb Yedidya had made the loan, and he realized that some drastic steps were needed. He went to court.

The case quickly became the talk of the town. No one had ever taken advantage of Reb Yedidya before, and such a thing was not even imaginable. On the appointed date, the courtroom was crammed with local spectators. As it was public knowledge that the goldsmith had never asked for documentation, they wondered if he could even prove his case.

The case went poorly. Because Reb Yedidya was unable to furnish some kind of proof that he was owed money, the judge had no choice but to rule against the pious goldsmith.

What Reb Yedidya did next was nothing short of remarkable. He stepped outside, spread out his hands to the heavens, and cried, "Master of the World! You know I do not lend out money to become famous or popular. I do it only for the sake of Your Great Name, for You have commanded us to love all people and to show kindness to all. This is how I am scrupulous in fulfilling Your commandment of *gemilat chasadim,* acts of kindness. I did not ask the borrower for any favors or even for simple thanks. Do I deserve this ruling?"

The people filing out of the courtroom watched this additional spectacle in awe. They completely ignored the defendant, the Gentile borrower, who had also exited the building and, like them, listened to Reb Yedidya's impassioned plea.

Something broke within the man's heart. He ran right up to Reb Yedidya, trembling.

"Forgive me for my impudence," he cried. "You are the righteous one; I am wicked. You will see that I will pay you back all the money today."

And so it was.

Part
TWO

Chapter
FIVE

ANTIQUES AND MIRACLES

Yosef Kusayov led a difficult but colorful life. Born in Samarkand in 1912 to Yaakov Kusayov, he joined the local *cheder* at age six and spent his formative years under the tutelage of great Chassidim then living in Samarkand: Rabbis Simcha Gorodetsky, Chezkiya Kaikov, and Eliyahu Mani Niyazov.

The Kusayov family later relocated to Moscow. Back in those days, this was no simple trip – the two cities are nearly two thousand miles apart – but Moscow presented greater business opportunities, and Reb Yaakov felt the move was justified. It was there that the Kusayovs dealt in rare coins and antiques.

The Soviet government created ideal conditions for a black market: shortages, state-controlled prices set below demand, and the gap between artificial and free-world prices. It was a world rife with corruption, but doing business in the shadow economy was crucial simply to make ends meet. By selling their wares this way, the Kusayovs were able to live in relative comfort – until someone notified the authorities.

Yaakov soon found himself behind bars. He was beaten and interrogated until he admitted to owning expensive coins and jewelry, for which he was promptly sentenced.



Yaakov Kusayov

This all happened a few days before Pesach 5692 (1932). On the first night of the holiday, Yaakov declared a hunger strike. This in itself was a grievous offense that would have wrought terrible consequences.

Miraculously, the warden panicked and pleaded, "Taste some food or drink some water." When a day or two passed without result, he offered to bring Yaakov food from anyone on the outside – even family members – but to no avail.

"It won't make a difference," Yaakov countered. "I can't trust anyone. Someone may tamper with the food before it gets to me."

Worn down by Yaakov's stubbornness, the warden arrived at four in the morning and released him!

Yaakov soon returned to his business dealings. Two years passed. Suddenly, one day, twelve police officers burst into the Kusayov residence, where they took up positions.

"We arrested some smugglers," announced their commander. "We found them carrying all sorts of contraband – rare coins, antiques, foreign currency. We interrogated them; they say you are their chief supplier." He then turned to his agents and bade them search the home carefully.

Yaakov's heart sank. Having already suffered imprisonment once for dealing in forbidden merchandise, he knew that any other leniency would be impossible.

But then a second miracle occurred. The commander, having decided to supervise his men, chose a particularly sturdy chest on which to sit – without realizing that this chest contained all of Yaakov's merchandise.

The police spent the better part of the day ransacking the Kusayov home – shredding pillows, slicing open mattresses, and scattering clothing. They splintered and broke the furniture,

in search of telltale cavities. At last, they admitted defeat. All the "contraband" they did find amounted to fifty pairs of shoes, dozens of pairs of socks, and some suit jackets.

The commander dusted himself off from his chair, glanced at the trembling family in disgust, and ordered his men to confiscate the items. Finally, they left.

The Kusayovs gaped at each other in shock. True, the head of the family had been spared, but their entire home was destroyed. Sensing Divine Intervention, one of their sons – whose name was Yochoi – decided to act. As secretary to Vyacheslav Molotov, a prominent Soviet politician, Yochoi possessed a certain influence and measure of preferential treatment. Nevertheless, what he did next was daring. He marched into the police station and began to argue with the commander.

"We were justified!" protested the commander. "We did find contraband at your parents' home! Dozens of shoes, socks, and jackets."

"You would punish a family for having a lot of children and relatives? Is that a crime?" Yochai countered. "We need all the clothing back. My family has nothing to wear."

Beads of sweat gathered on the commander's forehead. He would not argue with someone of Yochai's stature; but neither would he forget the affront to his authority. Finally, turning to his aides, the commander barked some instructions, and soon Yochoi returned home with all the confiscated clothing.

Nevertheless, his father felt uneasy. The resulting anguish strained his already weakened heart, and he ended up hospitalized for six months. After his release, his emaciated appearance so shocked his own father – Reb Chaim – that the latter prayed that his soul be taken away to spare him the anguish of seeing his son suffer. Reb Chaim passed away the following night, *Motzei* Shabbos, 13 Teves 5697 (1937).

Deeply grieved, Reb Yaakov never regained his former strength, and he too passed away six months later. Thus the Kusayov family sustained two great losses within a very short time.

In Wartime

Four years passed in relative quiet. Then one night, in 5701 (1941), as Yosef slept, his father appeared to him in a dream.

"It is urgent that you leave Moscow immediately," the latter commanded. "Also, take upon yourself to study photography."

Visibly shaken, Yosef departed the city with his family and moved back to Samarkand. He enrolled in photography classes offered by a local university, where he excelled in his studies, graduating with a diploma, and began receiving lucrative job offers. There was one that would take him all the way to Siberia – that vast, forbidding region of Russia and northern Asia – and make the family relocate to the city of Kurgan. During this time, he convinced his brother Yochoi to join him.

Kurgan received its name after nomadic burial places (*kurgans*). Located south of the West Siberian Plain, it became the major hub of transportation routes from Central Russia to Siberia. Yosef and his family planned to stay there for only a short while before moving on to Siberia, where he would begin his photography work. But then, in June, World War Two came to Russia with Operation Barbarossa, the Nazi invasion. As Hitler's armies swept through the land, the safest thing Yosef could do at this juncture was escape with his family back to their ancestral home in Samarkand.

With the Soviet Union now in "The Great Patriotic War" against Germany, all travel became fraught with danger and all passengers subject to search. Although Yosef intended to take the rail line to Samarkand, his papers showed Moscow as his place of residence, which would make him highly suspect and vulnerable to questioning. Complicating matters, Yochoi insisted that his brother abandon travel plans in order to avoid jeopardizing their family during wartime.

But Yosef was educated to live with faith. "I am not worried," he declared. "Hashem watches over us. He will protect us." Fortified, he went ahead and purchased four railway tickets on the Siberia-Moscow-Samarkand line: one for him, one for Yochoi, and two for his children.

The first miracle of their journey occurred right after leaving Kurgan. Yosef watched, feigning unconcern, as officials strode through every car and checked the papers of every passenger. Step by step, they approached the Kusayov group. They stopped first at Yochoi, scanned his documents, and then, oddly, glanced past Yosef and moved on to the next passenger.

After many days, the train steamed into the first major stop – Orenburg, located in the southern Urals near the mouth of the Sakmara River, southeast of Moscow, and unofficially known as the "Asian Capital" of Russia. From there, they planned to switch to a Moscow-bound train.

Yosef and Yochoi found the station jammed with thousands of refugees who were lined up outside the ticket window. Realizing it was futile to catch the next train if they patiently awaited their turn, Yochoi marched boldly up to the front of the line and rapped on the window.

Then the second miracle occurred. The ticket window opened immediately. The clerk grabbed their train tickets and stamped them all through to Samarkand, without bothering to compare their residency documents with their destination.

But then, within a few minutes, two policemen approached Yochoi and ordered him into their office. A quick body search revealed a package containing fifty thousand rubles tied around his waist – a veritable fortune!

"I'm using this money for our business," Yochoi explained calmly. "My brother standing outside is a professional photographer. We're traveling to Moscow to stock up on quality photo paper. The money is from our customers; when we get to Moscow, we have to send them these materials straight away."

Yochoi had had the foresight to prepare bogus invoices complete with customer names and addresses. The officers reviewed his paperwork, returned the money, and released him immediately. Heart in his mouth, he returned to Yosef and the group boarded the next train to Moscow.

The train wheezed slowly along the tracks, making frequent and unscheduled stops. It took them almost twelve days to

cover the 14,000 kilometers between Orenburg and Moscow. Throughout this time, not one person ever asked Yosef to show his papers; it was as though he had become invisible to the authorities.

The next miracle occurred as the train pulled into the train station in Tashkent. This time, Yosef was approached and asked to show his papers.

"I'm a professional photographer serving Tashkent, Siberia, and Moscow," he said, as he handed over his documents. "This is a business trip." His explanation was accepted, and his documents were returned without further ado.

After leaving the train station, the group stayed overnight at the home of a friend – Rachamim Elishayev – but the next morning found themselves already on their way to Samarkand. Once there, they stayed at the home of Avraham Borochov while arranging for their family's escape to the relative safety of Samarkand. Finally, after two months of frenzied activity, the Kusayovs were reunited safe and sound in Samarkand. They had to admit that this feat was only accomplished due to Yosef's unerring faith. Most people in his situation would never have undertaken such a foolhardy and dangerous trip.

Yosef still felt somewhat guilty about the amount of money they had smuggled into Samarkand. Some of the cash did, in fact, belong to the university where he had earned his diploma; they had paid him to buy photo stock and complete some photography work. One day, as he was out walking in Samarkand, he spied a giant poster proclaiming, *Temporary War Location of the Moscow-Samarkand University—3000 Students Enrolled.* Gratified at the opportunity to clear his conscience, Yosef walked in and returned all the money the university had entrusted in his care.

This act generated a lot of positive feelings towards the Jewish population in the city. (Years later, when the university returned to Moscow after the war, they promised to send Yosef a work visa so he could find employment with them once again should he ever return to Moscow.)

It would not be entirely accurate to say that Samarkand escaped the war effort. Police officers, always on the prowl for deserters, stopped people on the street and asked for identification papers. As the war worsened, they began impromptu roundups, herding groups of men into municipal buildings outfitted as recruitment centers. Once there, the men would be inspected by army doctors and drafted.

Yosef was unlucky enough to walk right into one of these roundups. When his turn came, the doctor examined his reflexes.

"Hmm, not sure whether to recruit you or set you free," he said.

Suddenly a heavily decorated officer walked by and took in the scene.

"Spare yourself the bother," he remarked sarcastically. "This man kept keeling over and fainting on his way here. Such a weak specimen will be absolutely useless as a soldier."

Yosef had no idea what the officer was talking about, but this person (could it have been Elijah the Prophet?) convinced the doctor to deliver Yosef a six-month exemption.

Meanwhile, in an ironic twist of events, Yosef's wife Penina had left their home to try bribing a high-ranking police officer in the hope of securing Yosef's release. Not only did the officer refuse the bribe, but he arrested her on the spot! This ended well, albeit bizarrely, for Penina: friends of the family hurried to the police station and proved that Yosef was sitting at home. How could she be arrested for bribery when the person in question was a free man?

"Obviously," they argued, "this lady is not completely right in the head. Prosecuting her for bribery is ridiculous! They'll laugh you out of court." Embarrassed and confused, the police released Penina at once.

Fellow Passenger

Divine Providence protected Yosef for many years. Once, upon being summoned to appear at a certain bureau in Moscow,

he packed his bags, took leave of his family, and found a train to the Russian capital. As soon as he boarded, his spirits plummeted – every car seemed packed to capacity. There was no way he could see himself surviving the six-day journey on his feet, wedged between fellow passengers.

Suddenly a conductor materialized at his elbow. "Would you care for a private car, sir?" he asked. "Some are reserved for foreigners and dignitaries. I can take you there but you will have to pay full price."

Yosef was in no mood to haggle. He grabbed his bags and followed the conductor into another rail car. He could scarcely believe his eyes – the rail car was nearly empty, with two people per room! Each car was outfitted with showers, tables, and even beds.

Outside it was so dark that Yosef could not make out the face of his fellow passenger. The next morning he could not have been more surprised – sharing the room with him was a decorated general. The latter wished him good day and invited Yosef to share his breakfast.



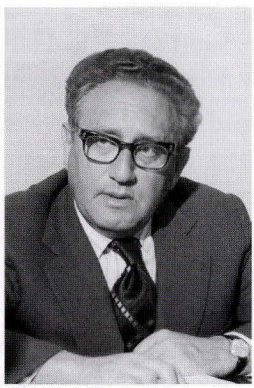
Yosef Kusayov at a welcoming of a Sefer Torah, that he donated in memory of his parents

It was during the breakfast that Yosef's faith shone through. "I am sorry," he said. "It is very kind of you, but I cannot eat any non-kosher food." He also explained the significance of his prayers and the *tefillin* he would be donning every morning of their journey together. The general seemed intrigued and the two spent many comfortable hours discussing a wide range of topics.

During the last stretch of their train ride together, the general divulged to Yosef some personal details – name, rank, address, and government position. "Don't hesitate to contact me," he offered. "Whenever you need my help, I will be there for you."

Indeed, that trip to Moscow turned out to be most fortuitous for the Kusayov family. Yosef called upon the general for help many times during those years of war and deprivation, and the general always came through. "The general was one of the true Righteous Gentiles," Yosef often declared later.

The Kusayov family immigrated to Israel in the late 1960s. In 5735 (1975), they moved once again – this time to America. Even all these years later, the deeply rooted education he had received under the great rabbis in Samarkand – Gorodetsky, Kaikov, and Niyazov – enabled Yosef to continue caring for others even in the most difficult circumstances. In one particular case, when a friend of his, Misha Leviev, was sentenced to death, Yosef traveled to many countries and met with many foreign leaders – including U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger – until he had the sentence successfully reduced to several years in prison.



U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger

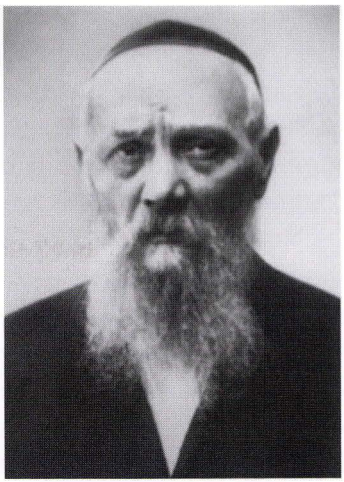
Chapter
SIX

RABBI AND MYSTIC

Much has been written about Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, father of the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, yet few know of the impact this saintly leader had on our region.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak had served as the chief rabbi of Yekaterinoslav. Considered in many respects the capital of Ukraine, Yekaterinoslav was definitely the regional center for anything and everything Jewish. The rabbi's courage and charisma made him a beloved figure among the Jewish residents, who could not help but be awed at his every word and movement, which bespoke wisdom, spirituality, and greatness.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's unique style of interpretation, coupled with his grasp of Kabbalah, allowed him to view the world around him through a mystical lens. It was not uncommon to find him sitting for hours on end, filling pages with his writings, pen barely able to keep up with his rapidity of thought. His brilliance reached beyond the Soviet Union: at one point, the heads of all the Chassidic *kollels* in Jerusalem tried to appoint him as their chief rabbi! Even today, his copious teachings – replete with numerical equivalents and layers of allusions – fascinate the seasoned scholar.



Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson

As the Communists stepped up their anti-religious propaganda, the Rebbe's father, due to his prominence, came under increasing scrutiny and persecution. He and his wife, Rebbetzin Chana, endured many frightening incidents which greatly affected their health, mental and physical.

Matters came to a head in 5699 (1939), when Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was arrested right before Pesach. This was followed by imprisonment, exile, deprivation, and hunger. The Soviets pursued his case with ruthlessness, treating him far worse than other religious prisoners. His stubborn refusal to sign any sort of confession invited additional harassment, but the Chief Rabbi would not be cowed, in spite of threats from exasperated interrogators. Without admission of evidence, he could not stand trial; therefore his captors decided to have the rabbi exiled.

He spent a harrowing month on a train, which carried him to the remote city of Alma Ata, Kazakhstan, a mere few hundred miles from the Tibetan border. From there, he had to walk to Kazul-Orda, and then further – to the city of Chi'li. There, he lived behind the ramshackle dwelling of a Tartar couple, in a shack – a dark, dank space filled with the buzzing of mosquitoes. He later returned to spend his last few months of life in Alma Ata.

In the meantime, Rebbetzin Chana lost no time in tracking down her esteemed husband, and soon joined in him exile. Even under such primitive conditions, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak retained the presence of mind to study Torah, and at one point expressed his desire to record his teachings for posterity. Taking her husband's words to heart, Rebbetzin Chana foraged in

the surrounding forests for certain roots and herbs which she soaked in water, to create homemade ink. Thanks to her efforts, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was able to jot down his Torah insights within the margins of some *sefarim* Rebbetzin Chana had brought him. (His writings were later smuggled out of Soviet Russia to America where, decades later, they were published.)

Alma Ata was not that far from Bukhara – about four hundred miles away. It was a bitter time, made even more so by the knowledge that worse times lay ahead. The Communists had uprooted any semblance of religious life and, on the eve of Hitler's invasion, the Soviet Union was unknowingly about to enter World War Two. The knowledge that a personage such as Rabbi Levi Yitzchak lived within relative proximity to our community brought us a measure of solace. Obviously we would have been happier had he not been arrested in the first place, let alone forced to live under such terrible conditions. Nevertheless, Bukharian Jews took advantage of the situation. Many



The resting place of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson. (Photo taken by the author when he was in Alma Ata in the late 1970s)

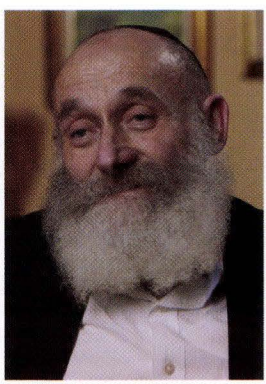
made the journey from their respective cities in Bukhara to meet with Rabbi Levi Yitzchak and take in his sagacious advice and teaching. On their part, they tried to alleviate his difficult circumstances.

Tragically, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak died in exile, after suffering terrible illness. During the final weeks of his life, many simple Jews came to be at his side – a dangerous admission of admiration for a political prisoner. Despite their low station in life, they did anything to spend a few minutes near this *tzaddik*.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was buried in Alma Ata. Because the righteous are as great in their passing as they were in life, many Jews traveled in secret to prostrate themselves at the resting place of this great man. Even during the darkest periods of the war and the Communist regime – when our community was nearly bereft of saintly rabbis and leaders – we found comfort in knowing we could continue to pray for Divine assistance at the resting place of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak. It became a tradition for those attempting to secure exit visas from the Soviet Union to travel to his gravesite and pray for Divine intervention. I feel fortunate to have been one of them.

Restoration

One of my friends in Tashkent was a yeshiva student by the name of Elazar Gorelick. His father Reb Mendel Gorelick, a gifted artist, had used his talents to create counterfeit passports, and his perfect forgeries enabled many Jews to escape the Soviet Union. He was eventually caught and sentenced to years of hard labor, so he was weak and unwell when his family moved to Tashkent.



Rabbi Elazar Gorelick

In 5731 (1971) Elazar's older brother received an exit visa for the United States. Upon his arrival, he showed the Lubavitcher Rebbe a photograph of the resting place of the latter's father.



The seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson

Bear in mind – Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was still alive when his son had left Russia and, as such, the Rebbe had never seen his father's resting place. The Rebbe thanked Elazar for the photo and asked him many questions about the people buried in the vicinity, as well as the cemetery in general. Examining the photo, the Rebbe noticed the deteriorating headstone, and he asked Elazar's brother to have it restored by his family in Tashkent.

Elazar told me about these events – we were study partners for many years –and I planned to join him in this sacred mission. As our families were very close, we trusted each other implicitly. To my regret, other obstacles arose in my way and Elazar had to tackle this job alone. He was in a dilemma – having just received an exit visa, which he could lose should the government learn that he was repairing a Jewish headstone.

Every step was a hurdle. Elazar's father went around covertly to raise funds for a slab of marble. Then began a search for a Jewish engraver who was both professional and G-d-fearing. Having completed the study of *safrut,* I offered to do the artistic lettering, but there was no way I could help with the carving.

Finally, thanks to the recommendation of my uncle Aryeh Niyazov, who lived in Tashkent, I was able to help Elazar locate a pious Bukharian carver by the name of Gavriel Ochanov, who agreed to work on the new headstone. Every day he immersed clandestinely in a secret *mikvah* before beginning his task.

When the headstone was finally completed, Elazar drove to Alma Ata. During the trip he was a nervous wreck, terrified the

police would pull him over and discover the headstone. Thank G-d, all went well, and he met up with a local Chabad resident who helped replace the old headstone with the new one.

Another dilemma developed: what to do with the old headstone? Suddenly, they had an idea – build around the resting place an enclosure made out of the pieces of the old headstone! They snapped a photo of their handiwork and Elazar quickly returned to his home in Tashkent.

When Elazar eventually immigrated to New York, the Rebbe thanked him profusely for his efforts in preserving Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's resting place. The Rebbe even insisted on fully reimbursing Elazar. Amazingly, Elazar learned that the Rebbe had earlier sent a letter with instructions to crush the old headstone into pieces and bury it around the resting place! Russian censors had prevented the letter from reaching its destination – ultimate proof that Chassidim had followed these instructions intuitively.

Elazar later married and moved to Melbourne, Australia, where he serves as Chabad emissary and co-directs the Chabad Russian Center. Like ripples in a pond, his self-sacrifice in



Reb Shlomo Chai Niyazov (left) with his uncle Reb Shlomo Aryeh Niyazov (right)



Rabbi Gavriel Niyazov receiving Kos Shel Brachah from the Rebbe

Tashkent continues to expand its influence, inspiring fellow Jews on the other side of the globe.

This episode ended with an interesting postscript. Years later, when my uncle Shlomo Aryeh Niyazov immigrated to Israel, he had difficulty finding a suitable place to live. At the time, my grandfather Reb Gavriel had the merit of speaking to the Rebbe in *yechidus*, private audience, and he casually mentioned Reb Aryeh's difficulties.

At the sound of my uncle's name, the Rebbe immediately made the connection between the Niyazov family and the restoration of his father's headstone. At the close of *yechidus*, the Rebbe gave orders for an apartment in Lod to be made available for my uncle as long as necessary. My uncle moved to the "Rebbe's apartment" in Lod and lived there for some time until his circumstances improved.

The Sanctity of Shabbos

I have already mentioned the name of Rabbi Chezkiya Kaikov, one of Rabbi Eliezrov's foremost students, but I would like to relate a little more about this great man and religious leader.

Rabbi Kaikov led a great synagogue in the old section of Samarkand. When hundreds of refugees began streaming into the city, they were granted complete freedom to live temporarily in the synagogue until their situation stabilized.

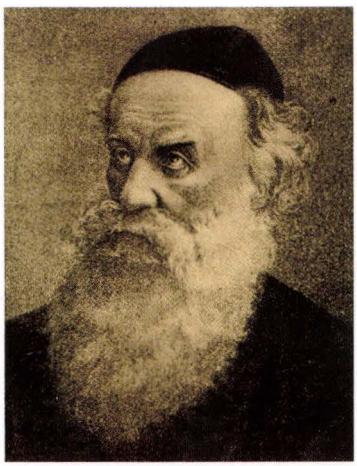
During World War Two, thousands of Jews fled Poland, the Baltic States, and western Russia for the relative safety of Central Asia. Samarkand became one of the central hubs. Local families tried to provide as much aid as possible.

One Shabbos afternoon, sixty refugee families suddenly arrived. The question arose whether it was permitted to desecrate the Day of Rest in order to bring them much needed food (there was no local *eruv*).

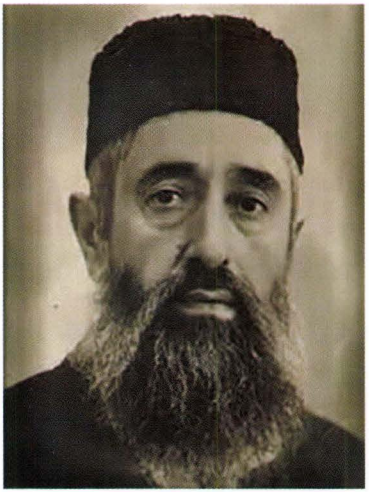
The *gabbai,* sexton, Reb Gavriel, feeling responsible, quickly set out toward the home of Rabbi Kaikov. He entered to find the rabbi teaching his weekly class in *Likuttei Torah,* a major work by the Alter Rebbe, to a group of thirteen people. Tormented at the thought of the hungry and restless refugees, Reb Gavriel had no choice but to halt the class and ask Rabbi Kaikov for his halachic ruling.

"There is no question. You *must* go around and collect as much food as necessary," the rabbi answered immediately. "The refugees are starving; this certainly constitutes a threat to their life and supersedes the sanctity of Shabbos."

He called out to the gathered students, "This class is over. Everyone go now! Help him collect food!"



Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the "Alter Rebbe"



Rabbi Chezkiya Kaikov

Those seated around the table immediately divided the city into thirteen sections. Each one ran off to his section to collect food. One of them, Reb Eliyahu Mani, rushed into the house of a wealthy individual and carried out all the pots from the kitchen.

"I'm sure you won't go hungry," he announced to the shocked family, "but there are many starving refugees who need this food. It's a life and death matter!" This was the kind of dedication found among Rabbi Chezkiya's students.

Everyone knew Rabbi Kaikov's influence on the religious welfare of the community; certainly the Soviet secret police kept a close watch. In May 1961, a rabidly anti-Semitic journalist published a lengthy article against the "primitive Jews" in Bukhara who were still studying Torah and keeping mitzvoth. In an interesting indication of Rabbi Kaikov's stature, the journalist wrote, "The spiritual leader of their neighborhoods is one Chezkiya Kaikov; he instructs them what foods they are allowed to buy in the stores and what foods to avoid."

Famed Doctor

One Shabbos morning in 5708 (1948), Rabbi Kaikov arrived in the synagogue to consult with two of his friends – my grandfather and Reb Abba Chiya Aminov.

"Listen to what I saw in a dream last night," he said. "I saw the famed Dr. Ettingoff of Germany."

Most of us would not be bothered by such dreams, which we tend to view as the result of little more than external stimuli or personal events. Lacking in significance, they at most allow us a peek into our subconscious.

But Rabbi Kaikov was made of a different caliber. He sensed that this particular dream bordered on the prophetic; therefore, he was not ready to ignore its message.

His friends shifted uncomfortably. "*Nu*," said Reb Abba Chiya, "a doctor symbolizes healing. It means you will be healed from whatever ails you."

A shadow of consternation passed over the rabbi's face. That day, as the congregation was praying Musaf, Rabbi Kaikov was informed that he had "guests" awaiting him outside.

It was the police. The rabbi was escorted a few blocks, away from the dozens of eyes peering fearfully from the synagogue windows. A black car waited. Rabbi Kaikov was whisked off to police headquarters, where he was interrogated for hours.

During that ordeal Rabbi Kaikov said, "We are Jews; we have always been Jews; and we will always be Jews." The officer transcribing his words deliberately changed this to read, "We hate Communism; we have always hated Communism, and we will always hate Communism." For this statement alone, Rabbi Kaikov was sentenced to twenty-five years' imprisonment.

Five years later, in May 1953, Stalin died. His more liberal successor, Nikita Khrushchev, launched an amnesty program freeing thousands of former political prisoners – Rabbi Kaikov among them. Jubilation filled the streets of the Jewish quarter as their beloved rabbi returned.

At the first opportunity, the rabbi summoned his friends and immediately reminded them of the dream that had foreshadowed the day of his arrest.

"I will tell you the true meaning of that dream," he explained. "The doctor's name, Ettingoff, is similar to the Hebrew words *eten gofris* – 'I will rain down burning sulfur upon you.' This alluded to the fact that I would be imprisoned, afflicted by suffering.

"Yet, the name was prefaced by the title 'Doctor' – signifying that I would be healed quickly. Therefore, I only spent five years in jail, instead of twenty-five."

Part
THREE

Chapter
SEVEN

TANYA: THE EXIT VISA

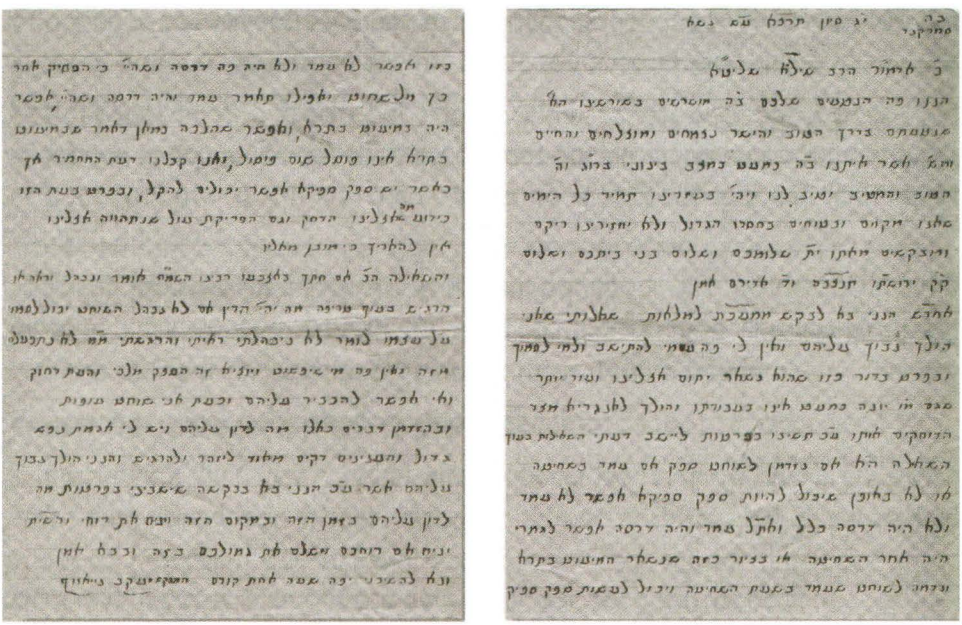
Among my great-uncles was Yaakov Niyazov. He was considered one of the brightest pupils of Rabbi Eliezrov. An assiduous scholar, he received a writ of authorization (*kabala*) from Rabbi Eliezrov, affirming his proficiency in the laws of ritual slaughter.

Reb Yaakov loved nothing more than Torah study. A gifted orator, he gave popular *shiurim,* lectures. One of the elite few to continue the legacy of Rabbi Eliezrov after the latter's departure, Reb Yaakov corresponded regularly with his esteemed mentor, keeping him apprised of the community's spiritual situation.

> The first batch of seedlings you planted here has blossomed into full maturity. Our situation has stabilized; we pray that G-d, in His great mercy, continue to bestow goodness upon us.
>
> I have questions, but there is no one here I can ask. We live in an orphaned generation; I can't rely on anyone – the only other *shochet* here is under such tremendous pressure that he has practically stopped his holy work. Therefore, I implore you, please respond to my questions and set my mind at ease, for I have two questions that no one here can resolve.

My great-uncle then spelled out two areas of halachic difficulty that seldom arose during the slaughtering process. After citing different opinions, he concluded his letter by bemoaning the realities of life.

> In our situation, when poverty has become rampant and people feel restricted by stringent rulings, maybe there is room to rely on the leniencies in these cases? I will tell you the truth. I become so flustered when any of these two situations arise that I walk around in a daze. My heart hurts with the pain of indecision.
>
> Therefore once again, I plead with you to answer me decisively and in detail, taking into account the harsh realities of our circumstances you recognize so well, to guide me in making the correct ruling. Your answer – and the sooner the better! – will bring me great relief.



Letter sent from Samarkand in 1931 by Rabbi Yaakov Niyazov to his teacher Rabbi Eliezrov in Eretz Yisroel

This letter offers a glimpse into the spiritual character of this *shochet* (ritual slaughterer). In Samarkand at a time of intense deprivation, when fellow Jews faced grim decisions on how to feed and clothe their families, Reb Yaakov's most agonizing concern was a ruling in two rare cases of *shechita*! At that time the vast majority of people in his position would have simply gone about their religious duty of providing local Jews with permissibly kosher meat. But so absolute was Reb Yaakov in his convictions, so permeated was he in authenticity, that everything had to be done according to the highest standard.

Encounter & Tragedy

My great-uncle was among the group of Bukharian Jews who traveled to the Rebbe Rayatz – Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn the Sixth (Previous) Lubavicher Rebbe – then living in Leningrad, to request that he send an emissary to Samarkand. This was not his only encounter with the Rebbe. On several occasions, he asked the Rebbe for a blessing that he be granted an exit visa – a difficult feat in those times – so that he could fulfill a lifelong dream to live in Eretz Yisrael.

The Rebbe Rayatz listened carefully, then replied: "Study the Tanya until you know it by heart. With the help of Hashem, you will then be allowed to leave."

And so it was. It took Reb Yaakov two years to learn the Tanya verbatim. At the end of that time, in 1933, he was allowed to immigrate. Like so many preceding



Rabbi Yaakov Niyazov

him, Reb Yaakov took up residence in the Bukharian quarter of Jerusalem.

Fifteen years passed. In 1948, during the Israeli War of Independence, the Arab Legion ambushed a large convoy on the way to Hadassah Hospital, on Mount Scopus, capturing the heights around Jerusalem. They then closed off all the major roads. Together with local militias, British and Egyptian soldiers enforced the blockade, successfully repelling Jewish forces that attempted to reach the city.

Convoys ceased arriving in Jerusalem. Although the citizens were fully cognizant of what potentially lay in store, they remained loyal to their beloved city.

My great-uncle was among those cut off from the rest of the country. The blockade brought the Jerusalemites to the brink of starvation. But although food and water became critically low, spirits remained high.

And then the Arab Legion cut off the water supply.

The lack of access was completely disruptive. A foreboding pervaded the city, as the mayor of Jerusalem introduced tight food rationing. Residents prowled the fields to pick and eat mallow leaves – donkey food. Jews outside Jerusalem who desperately tried to break the blockade faced repeated attacks on the road, suffering heavy casualties. Everyone knew, from a strategic point of view, the futility of defending the city.

One morning, Reb Yaakov, bucket in hand, went to join the line of people snaking through a Jerusalem courtyard, hoping to bring home some fresh water before the rations ran out. Suddenly, a volley of machine gunfire stuttered. People scurried for their lives, but it was too late for my great-uncle. Reb Yaakov was killed for dwelling in the city he loved so dearly.

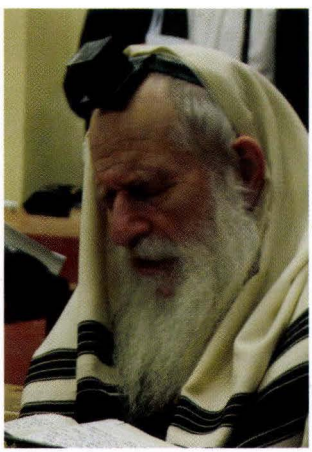
May G-d avenge his blood!

Chapter
EIGHT

ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

There was something special about my grandfather, Eliyahu Mani Niyazov. *Mani* is the Aramaic translation for *appoint* (*Bamidbar* 1:50). When combined with the name *Eliyahu,*the connotation becomes "Eliyahu, the appointed one."

Reb Eliyahu had an aura of goodness about him, and his face radiated kindness; people actually took to calling him "*Dzura* (pronounced *Joo-rah*), which means friendly. Dzura cut an impressive figure – tall, handsome, elegant. Blessed with a photographic memory, he had perfect recall of everything he had ever studied, and he followed the laws of *Shulchan Aruch* in their entirety.



Reb Pinye Korf

He was revered by all, who considered him a saint and a great personality. The Chassid Pinye Korf recalled a time during his boyhood when he was at Samarkand with Reb Mendel Futerfas. The latter



Rabbi Eliyahu Mani Niyazov (Dzura)

brought Reb Korf to someone's house where my grandfather was staying. "This is Dzura," he said. "You've heard about him. Now you got to see him." "That's not all," added Reb Mendel cryptically. "Dzura learns Chassidus the same way he davens." By this, Reb Mendel alluded to the fact that when my grandfather studied ma'amorim that discuss the refinement of the body and soul, he already achieved a level of Divine attachment usually attained through the davening that followed the study of Chassidus. (The Chassid Meir Itkin, who had met Dzura as well, was proud to learn in the late 1990s that the latter's grandchildren had managed to leave the country in 1978 and that his great-grandchildren are learning Chassidus in Yeshiva Tomchei Temimim in Crown Heights, the Lubavitcher Rebbe's neighborhood.)

After completing *cheder* under Rabbi Eliyahu Janak, Dzura went to work, at the age of thirteen, for a cousin in a factory that manufactured silk handkerchiefs. The pay, though low, was enough to support him. Four years later, at age seventeen, he overheard his cousin order the manager, "Tell Dzura he is fired. He no longer has to work for me."

Dzura decided to ignore this piece of news. He continued showing up for work as though nothing had changed. His cousin, increasingly agitated at the daily sight of Dzura, finally approached him and shouted, "What are you doing here? I gave you orders not to come here anymore! I am not going to pay you for your work."

Dzura stared at him impassively. Without saying a word, he returned to his place at the factory. He continued to show up

each day, until the owner capitulated and called Dzura into his office.

"Listen, cousin," he said begrudgingly, "I must say that I admire your tenacity. I'll make you an offer. When dealers and shopkeepers come to buy from me, they have to buy my handkerchiefs by volume, no matter the cost. I'll give you the chance to buy them by piece; you alone can buy the highest-quality silk handkerchiefs in the most popular colors. This will give you a competitive edge."

He waved his hand. "Now go – take the handkerchiefs and sell them for yourself."

Dzura accepted the offer. Buying and selling those handkerchiefs, he made a small fortune and, merely seventeen, became wealthy. Flush with money and success, he could have easily capitalized on his entrepreneurial skills and expanded his business. But thoughts kept returning to the *cheder*. Until now, he had had no choice but to earn money to survive. Having reached financial security, he wanted nothing else but to resume Torah study.

One day Dzura took all his money, walked over to his brother Sasson, and placed the money into his brother's hands.



Left to right: Reb Yehuda Chitrik learning Torah with Reb Meir Itkin

"Take it," he said. "I'm going back to learn with the boys studying with Rabbi Eliezrov."

At first, Rabbi Eliezrov hesitated. "It is too late for you to join now. Having tasted the success of the marketplace, you will be impeded by those distractions."

But Dzura could not be swayed. He begged Rabbi Eliezrov, until the latter agreed to reaccept him.

My grandfather joined his brothers Yaakov and Gavriel, who were already learning there. Every day their mother, Cheftziba, made her way over the yeshiva to bring her children a warm meal to keep them fed and focused.

His entrepreneurial instincts still intact, my grandfather used his daily hot meal to run a "business" of sorts in yeshiva as well. He approached an older, assiduous student by the name of Yosef Eliav – whose level of learning surpassed his own – and made a proposition.

"Listen, Yosef, it takes you a quarter of an hour to walk home for lunch, and the same time to walk back to yeshiva again.

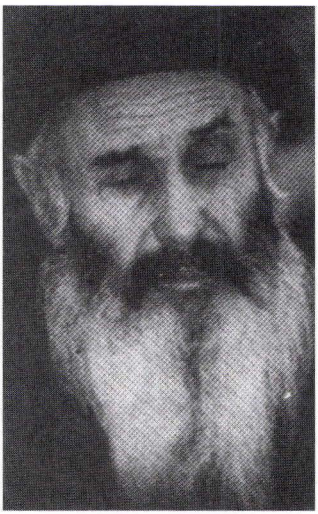
"I have a better idea. Stay here and eat my hot lunch, and instead spend that half hour learning with me."

Yosef agreed. My grandfather later said that this agreement was one of the best investments of his life. Given Yosef's impressive amount of Torah knowledge, the daily learning arrangement proved quite beneficial for my grandfather, who retained everything.

Having excelled in his studies, my grandfather received ordination from Rabbi Eliezrov to serve as a *shochet.* Ever meticulous, he became one of the few who accepted upon himself the Chassidic custom of wearing a long *kapota,* cloak, on Shabbos.

Spiritual Leader

As mentioned earlier, my grandfather was part of the delegation that traveled to the Rebbe Rayatz in 1927, asking him to send a leader to replace Rabbi Eliezrov. This was the impetus for Rabbi Simcha Gorodetsky's arrival in Samarkand. Rabbi Gorodetsky had such an impact on the minds of his young charges



Rabbi Simcha Gorodetsky

that my grandfather soon formed a group of seven students who agreed to travel with him to join a branch of the famed Yeshivas Tomchei Tmimim in the Russian town of Nevel.

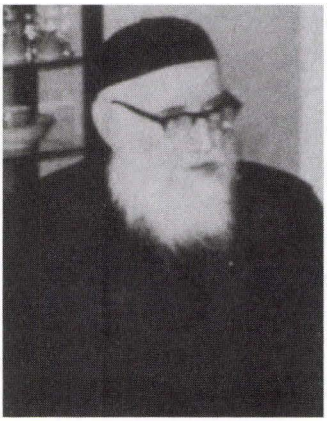
Chassidim in the town of Nevel were forever ensconced in Chabad lore for their spiritual accomplishments. Students of the clandestine yeshiva – operating at great self-sacrifice under watchful Soviet eyes – were lucky to be raised by the great men who graced their study hall.

Among the group of seven – Avraham Yitzchakov, Reb Yochoi Yakubov, Reb Menachem Eliyov, Reb Emmanuel Kimyagarov and others – was a young teenager named Chaim, who my grandfather thought would blossom in Tomchei Tmimim. When reality proved otherwise, my grandfather had to intervene and send the boy back home. My grandfather would pay dearly for this intervention.

In the onset of the Nazi invasion of Russia, many Chassidim fled to the relative safety of Samarkand. At this point, the group of yeshiva students managed to escape to Georgia, in the Caucasus, where they set up camp under the famed Rabbis Mordechai Perlow and Avrohom Slavin. During this time, they received an authentic education based on the principles of Chabad Chassidus, one that fused its students with courage and dedication to uphold Yiddishkeit in the most difficult of circumstances.



Rabbi Avraham Yitzchakov



Rabbi Mordechai Perlow

Dzura, too, drank from those deep wells. He too would end up imprisoned a total of three times for his so-called "counter-revolutionary" activities.

His first imprisonment occurred on a Shabbos. My grandfather was praying in the synagogue when a group of police agents stormed in, sending a ripple of fear through the room. The agents arrested my grandfather in full view of all the other congregants in order to drive home the message: anyone engaging in religious activities would be punished.

The agents loudly read out a list of sins: "Helping arrange the Torah schools."

Apparently some informant had done his legwork. In an interesting admission of my grandfather's impact, this informant had told the police, "Any child under Dzura's influence becomes linked to him forever. He is the most dangerous when he teaches; he impresses the fear of Heaven into his students."

Then the police officer handed my grandfather a document. "Should you sign a commitment to cease these activities, we will drop all charges."

My grandfather refused. Regardless of the outlandish charges, or the threat of imprisonment, it was Shabbos, a day he would not desecrate. The police roughly escorted him outside, where a van waited.

Terrified congregants, realizing that their beloved friend was risking his life for the sanctity of the holy day, raised a small fortune to hire a lawyer, but efforts came to naught. Dzura was sentenced to four years' imprisonment.

In an amazing stroke of Divine Providence, a general amnesty was granted to all prisoners serving sentences under five years. Within a short time, my grandfather returned home.

"Your Ordeal is Over"

Nevertheless, government agents kept careful watch on my grandfather. They decided to open another investigation. The crime? "Kidnapping" a teenager – Chaim – and enrolling him in the illegal Tomchei Tmimim.

Chaim had been residing in a state-run orphanage prior to being persuaded by my grandfather to learn with him – which, in the eyes of the authorities, magnified the severity of this "crime." Chaim himself testified about the incident. It did not matter that Dzura had later returned the boy to the orphanage after the latter's academic failure; the police were out to undermine my grandfather.

Dzura languished in jail for close to two years, with no family contact. He suffered beatings, humiliation, solitary confinement and torture – all aimed to break him down and wring a confession. Thanks to his deep conviction, Dzura would not be broken. Despite all their tactics, he refused to admit to any guilt.

Meanwhile, in a stroke of ingenuity, Dzura noticed a gentleman visiting a fellow prisoner. "Sir," he whispered, motioning him over. He gave the visitor his jacket. "Please pass this on to my family."

When my grandmother and her sons ripped apart the seams, they found a hidden note, in which my grandfather detailed the particulars of his case – to deflect blame by naming his brother the culprit. (His brother was already in Jerusalem; it was common practice among prisoners during interrogation to give names of people out of long reach of



Rabbi Avrohom Slavin

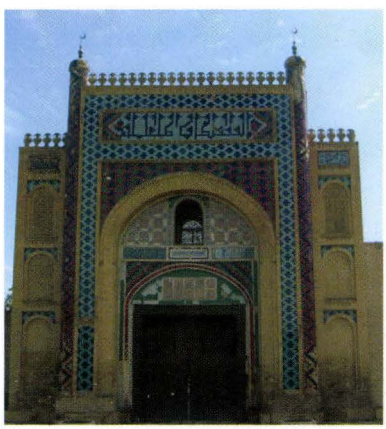
the Communists.) With this information in hand, the wheels of progress began turning. Dzura's two other brothers Reb Gavriel and Reb Sasson met with Chaim – by now a grown man – and asked for his help in having Dzura released.

Chaim balked. He had already testified about the "kidnapping," even admitting to the judge that Chassidim had told him, "Soon Moshiach will come, and then we will be freed from the iron fist of the Soviet government." Although he hated to see my grandfather suffer, he could not risk contradicting his testimony, which most likely would end up in charges of perjury.

However, he did agree to one thing: in court he would describe the man who took him to learn in yeshiva as "bald in the back." Since this lack of identifying sign would exonerate my grandfather, for he was bald only in the front, family members were sure that Dzura would be released. They offered Chaim money for his help, but he refused.

Tensions mounted as the date of the court case drew near. So locally popular was my grandfather that the name of the presiding judge was concealed out of fear she would be bribed to set the prisoner free.

My grandfather's family hired a top lawyer, instructing him how to guide the witnesses to testify that the person guilty was bald in the back. Jewish residents knew the outcome of the trial would dramatically affect his efforts to strengthen Yiddishkeit in the community, but they were barred from the proceedings.



A Jewish cemetery in Bukhara, located in the area of the Old City

Later, upon his release, he described to them what had happened. The prosecutor, incensed at the new testimony, hammered away at Chaim, attempting to overturn his testimony.

Chaim, intimidated, was barely able to insist that the kidnapper had been bald in the back and was therefore not my grandfather.

"The prosecution calls upon the second witness," announced the clerk. A Jew by the name of Chizkiya Sezenayov stepped forward. He spoke about my great-uncle Yaakov Niyazov, by then living in Eretz Yisrael, who had enabled him to study tailoring in Leningrad (today S. Petersburg).

"One day, I saw Yaakov walking on the street, holding the hand of this person, Chaim," Chizkiya continued. "Chaim was a teenager then. I stopped Yaakov and thanked him for his help in getting me to learn the art of tailoring. Thanks to him, I was able to support my family."

"Did this Yaakov have any identifying signs?" asked the prosecutor.

There was a pause.

"He sure did," replied Chizkiya confidently. "He was bald in the back."

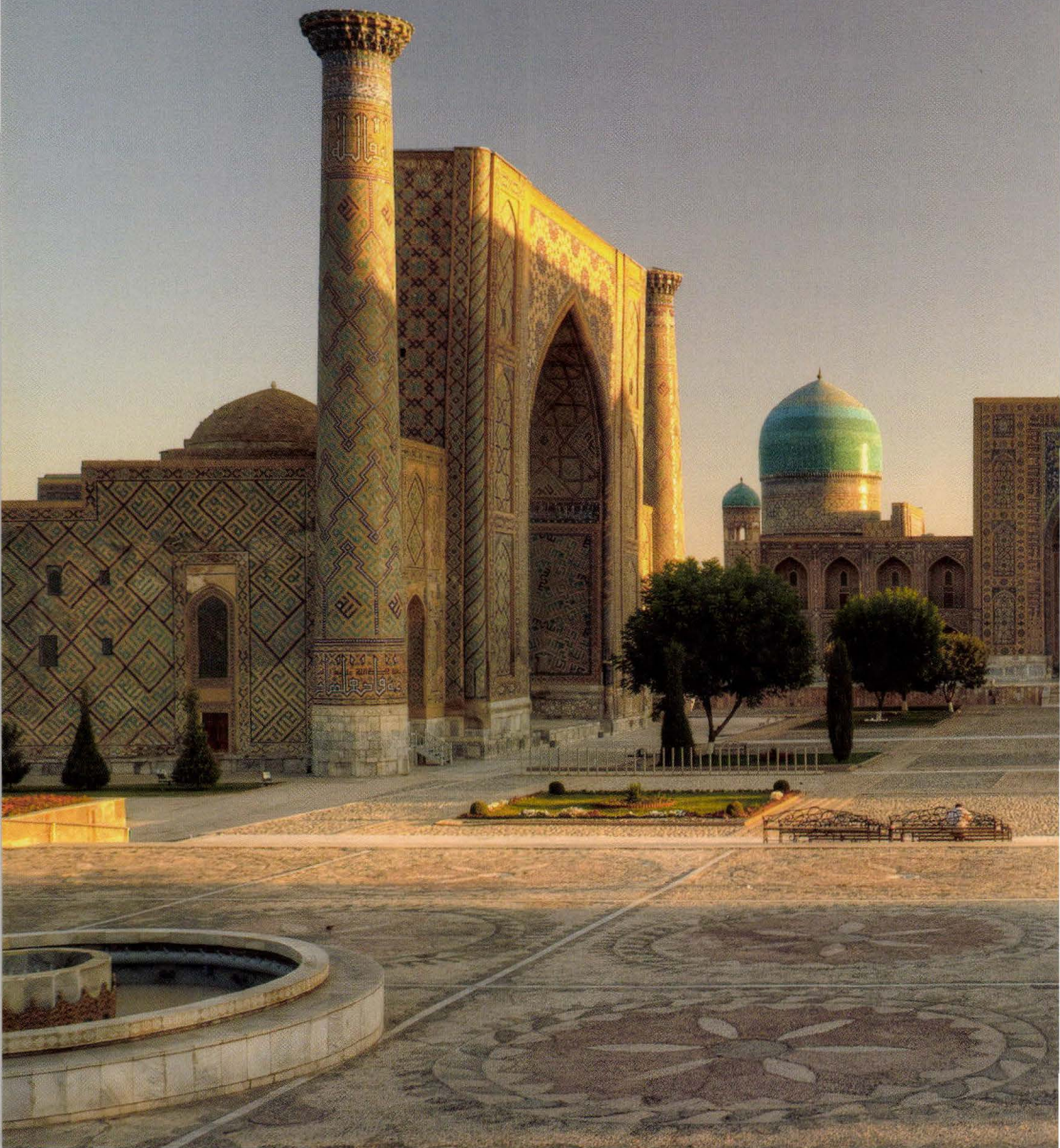
The courtroom fell silent. In desperation, the prosecutor called my grandfather to the stand. In a bold and shocking move, my grandfather announced, "I will only testify face-to-face against the person who slandered me with thirteen pages of accusations!" Left with no alternative, the judge postponed the trial to the following day to locate the lead informant.

Later that day, family members, anxiously waiting outside, managed to bribe one of the court clerks who was exiting the building. He revealed the name of the judge, and the news of the postponement.

"It's a sign from Hashem," one of my uncles exalted. "The Gemara states: 'A judgment that is postponed is canceled (*Sanhedrin* 95a).'"

Armed with the name of the presiding judge, the family sent a sizable bribe to her house. Within a short time, the judge sent back the bribe, apologetically explaining that, due to Dzura's prominence, a special board of officials was tracking her actions in this case.

The Registan was the heart of the ancient city of Samarkand. The name Registan means "sandy place" or "desert" in Persian. The Registan was a public square, where people gathered to hear royal proclamations, heralded by blasts on enormous copper pipes called dzharchis. It is framed by three madrasahs built in the 15th and 17th centuries. Left to right: Ulugh Beg Madrasah, Tilya-Kori Madrasah and Sher-Dor Madrasah.





"However," she said, "I'll do everything in my power to ensure justice is fairly dispensed."

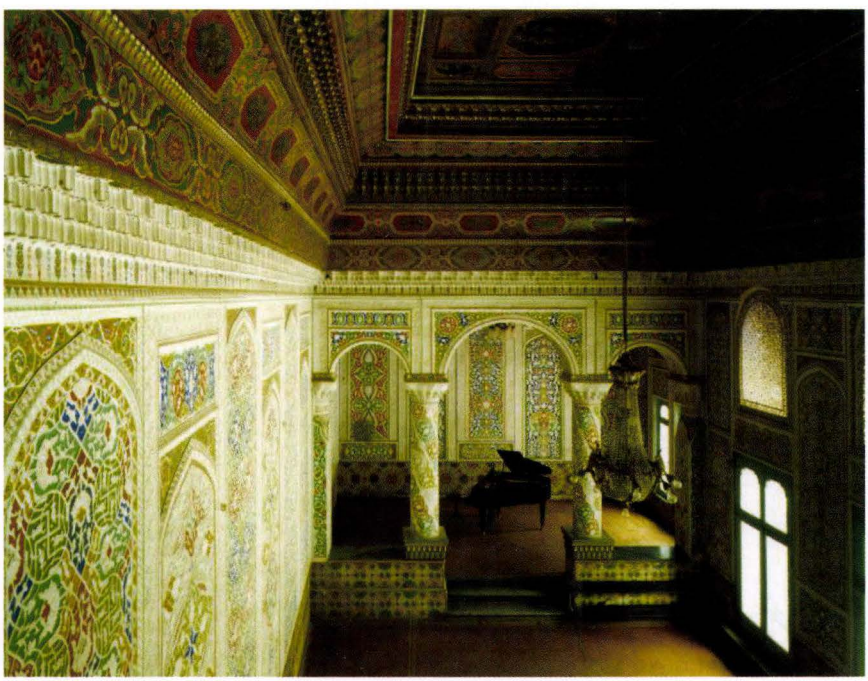
On the next day, the judge called upon the informer to testify. The man sweated as she hammered away with her questions.

"How do you know Dzura was the kidnapper? And how would you have knowledge about his religious activities?"

"Everyone knows," the informer stammered. "A thousand people could testify."

"I don't need a thousand witnesses!" snapped the judge. "Ten is enough! Give me the names of ten people who can testify, and I will summon them to court."

In confusion the informer fell silent. At this point, the judge called a three-hour recess, and the courtroom emptied. After the recess, she announced that she had found the allegations against Dzura to be without merit and that she was terminating his sentence. This was truly a miracle; during those difficult



Interior of Kalantarov House Synagogue, Samarkand

years, few people active in Jewish outreach were ever acquitted. Most were exiled, many never to be seen again.

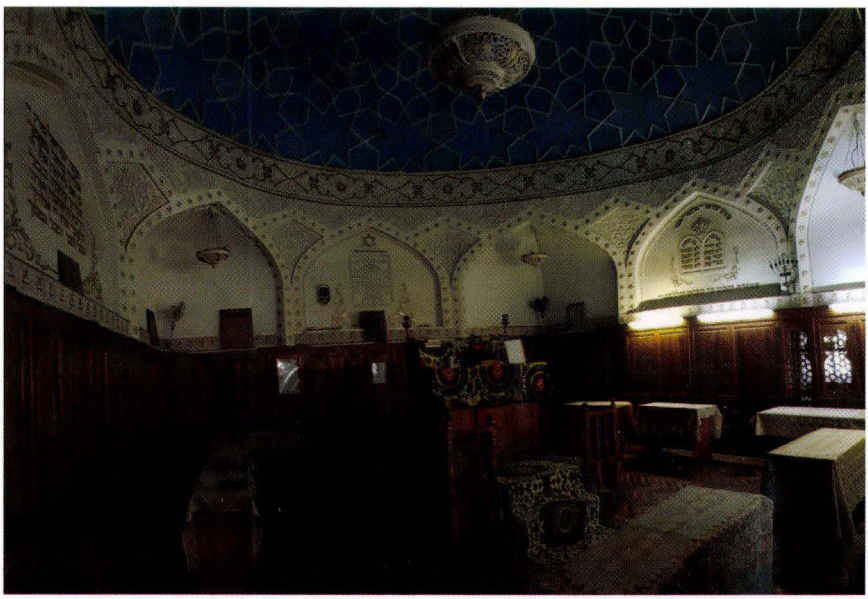
Meanwhile, Dzura, who understood little Russian, failed to grasp the judge's statement. He had slumped into his seat, resigned to being led out in handcuffs, never to see his family again. Seeing his despair, the judge descended from her high bench and approached him.

"You are free. Go home and rest. Your ordeal is over."

We later sent her many expensive gifts in gratitude. (Some even hugged and kissed the informant, to comfort him for losing the case, hoping he would never hurt our family again.)

Self-Law

Dzura's third and final arrest occurred when one day he took a package of precious bracelets to sell in the nearby town of Margilan. The medieval décor – small streets, stone settlements, fragrant gardens – lent this town a decidedly Oriental flavor,



Interior of the Gumbaz Synagogue, Bukhara, Uzbekistan

making it a popular vacation spot. Also known for the quality of its silk production, the city was a magnet for vendors.

As key players in Central Asian commerce, Margilan merchants were a law unto themselves. During Soviet times, their city was the heart of Uzbekistan's black market. My grandfather sold his bracelets for the princely sum of sixteen thousand rubles. From there, he decided to travel to Tashkent, where profits would go directly toward funding Torah classes and other Jewish activities.

Dzura stood patiently at the train station. Train schedules were unheard of in those days; passengers simply milled about, waiting for the next train to pull in. The minutes stretched into an hour, then two. Soon the time became interminable, so when a friend invited Dzura into his house to wait, out of the cold, my grandfather gladly agreed.

Unfortunately, on the way back to the train station, Dzura tripped over a bag and went sprawling across the sidewalk. Limping, he decided to walk along the sides of the road instead of the irregular pedestrian pavement. This unusual action raised the suspicions of patrolling officers. They subjected him to a body search, and found the rubles wrapped around his waist.

"A smuggler!" they announced. "You will be prosecuted."

My grandfather was whisked to Samarkand, where he languished in jail for almost half a year. At his trial he complained hotly about his arrest.

"I was planning to buy a house in Tashkent!" he argued. "A businessman takes legally earned money to buy a house – and for this he is jailed?" So convincing was he that the judge immediately set him free.

The day was Erev Pesach, which that year coincided with Shabbos. My grandfather, scholar that he was, knew he was permitted to transgress the holy day in order to escape a life-threatening situation. But he refused. He would not desecrate Shabbos. Leaving all his money and belongings at the jail, he walked to the home of the closest Jew. The Gentile jail warden, impressed at this display of religious authenticity, gathered

Dzura's belongings, followed him to the house, and deposited them on the floor.

War Effort

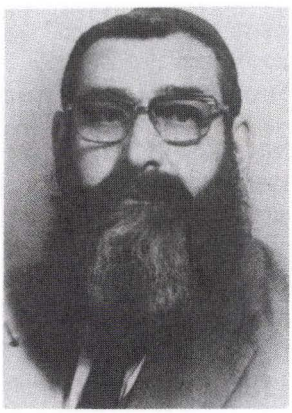
As the war worsened, a steady stream of refugees poured into the relative safety of Central Asia. Displaced persons from as faraway as eastern Poland made it to Tashkent and Samarkand. Many rode on the backs of camels, which usually transported large baskets of food; now, exhausted remnants of humanity lay slumped in the baskets, some at death's door. The influx reached such proportions that they slept and lived on the streets; the crowding made any walking through the Jewish quarter difficult.

My grandfather halted all his activities, abandoned his business, and toiled day and night to assist the hapless newcomers. Blessed with organizational talent, he encouraged other residents to join with him, as the human flow continued arriving in Bukhara and the Crimea.

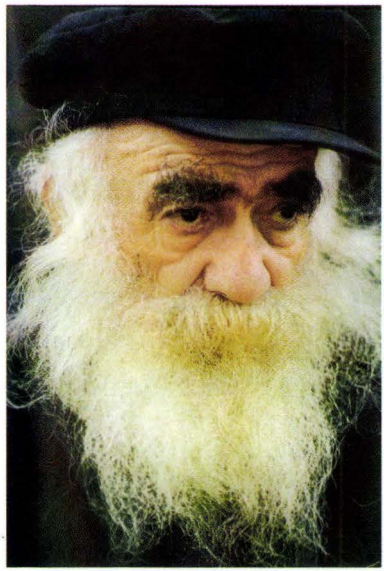
In view of the deteriorating situation, my grandfather asked permission to address the congregants of the main synagogue.

"Diamonds are rolling around in our streets!" he cried. "We have the chance to grab so many mitzvoth – we can offer work, food, clothing, and lodging to these poor people! This is your chance!"

Deeply moved, the Jewish community increased their efforts to accommodate the starving masses. They opened their gardens and courtyards, and prepared hot meals. Dzura did not rest for a minute. He once asked his brother, Gavriel, to allow yet another six families to live in his courtyard. After wresting his consent, Dzura commented wryly, "Even had you not agreed, I would have made you do it anyway."



Reb Nota Barkhan



Reb Mendel Futerfas

In the fall of 1941, forced to escape for his life from the guns of war, Rabbi Mendel Dubrawsky – Rosh Yeshiva in Lubavitch and Rav of Charkov – arrived in Samarkand with his grandson Yehoshua, destitute and homeless. Once again, my grandfather Dzura was the very first person in the city to approach the displaced Rosh Yeshiva and offer him food. Reb Mendel found a ramshackle basement where he and his grandson could sleep, but these "accommodations" were unfit for human lodging. Incredibly, the owner of the basement demanded rent money from the Rosh Yeshiva – money the latter did not have. When Reb Gavriel heard of this, he immediately invited Rabbi Dubrawsky and his grandson to take up residence in Reb Gavriel's ample home, alongside the many other Chassidim already living there.

Reb Gavriel was fortunate to own an exceptionally large house, which he put to full disposal. Many of the most renowned Chassidim and their families stayed at his residence and the surrounding courtyards – Yaakov Gurkov, Mendel Futerfas, Mendel Dubrawsky, Mendel Gurevitch. There they *davened*, studied, and *farbrenged*.

Many families, including those of Eliezer Gurevitch and Nota Barkhan, were on the receiving end of Dzura's hospitality. And for this my grandfather paid the ultimate sacrifice. The terrible hunger had weakened everyone's health, leaving them vulnerable to disease, as well as starvation.

My grandfather had taken in the family of the Chassid Notte Rabinov from Pahar. Reb Notte, who had been in charge

of the Rebbe's choir back in Lubavitch, was sick with typhus. Consequently, my grandfather's family contracted the disease. The children recovered, but Dzura himself could not summon enough strength to stave it off. He succumbed on 13 Nissan 5702 (1942), at the age of forty-seven, leaving behind his wife, eight orphans, and a stunned community.

His passing threw even the secret police into confusion. Several months later the Niyazov family again found themselves interrogated and their house ransacked. Their protestations that Dzura was no longer among the living fell upon deaf ears. Finally the family led the officers to the cemetery and showed them the tombstone marking Dzura's resting place.

When I was older and living in America, I met people who had attended my grandfather's funeral. They described how, in a sign of respect, the entire neighborhood had come to a halt. Even the Gentile merchants closed their stalls and bowed their heads silently as the procession made its way through the streets.

Jewish residents wailed loudly. In a way, unexpectedly, the community had lost its leader. Dzura's influence still serves as a source of inspiration for many who treasure his memory.

Chapter
NINE

ENDLESS ORDEAL

Reb Gavriel Niyazov was my maternal grandfather. He and my paternal grandfather – Dzura – were brothers. He too had studied under Rabbi Eliezrov, and the education he received gave him the strength to dedicate his life to the dissemination of Torah, even during the most dangerous times. A warm person, both a successful businessman and a pious Chassid, he earned the nickname *Ochill'dee* ("wide heart"). It reflected the widely felt appreciation for his kindliness and compassion.

Reb Gavriel was part of a select group that helped Rabbi Gorodetsky run Tiferes Bachurim. A brainchild of the Rebbe Rayatz, this program offered busy merchants and tradesmen the opportunity for Torah study after an exhausting day at work. Anyone between the ages of twenty and forty could come and learn *Chumash, Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, Gemara,* or a wide array of classes.

Although these programs met with great success in many countries, Tiferes Bachurim became an incredible lifesaver for those suffering under Soviet oppression. The program even attracted college students and medical professionals – those who would otherwise have never been exposed to anything about

Torah and Judaism. When describing the impact of this organization, the Rebbe Rayatz wrote, "Thank G-d, we see many youngsters becoming animated about Yiddishkeit."

Rabbi Gorodetsky, knowing it would only be a matter of time before his arrest for these religious activities, trained a circle of students, my grandfather included, to follow in his path and continue working to maintain Yiddishkeit. These students, fresh from the tutelage of Rabbi Eliezrov, were bolstered through their interaction with Rabbi Gorodetsky. My grandfather felt honored to serve as the *gabbai* of the Samarkand branch of Tiferes Bachurim.

Front Row Seat

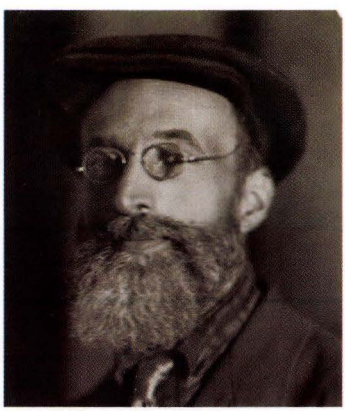
In the 1920s my grandfather was present at a Purim *farbrengen* that later became a historic part of Chabad's struggle against the Communists. The Rebbe Rayatz had been expounding Chassidic discourses in Leningrad, and the number of visitors clamoring to hear him rose dramatically – far exceeding the space he had been allotted by the government for his living quarters.

My grandfather, together with his friend Mordechai Pinchasov, had come to Leningrad to spend Purim with the Rebbe. That night, after hearing the Rebbe read the Megillah, my grandfather asked Chassidim if presenting the Rebbe with *mishloach manot* were acceptable.

"If you wish to give, you can," they answered.

"Are there any special foods the Rebbe prefers?" my grandfather asked further.

The Chassidim, uncertain, directed him to members of the Rebbe's family. As foodstuffs were more readily available in Uzbekistan than in Central Russia, my grandfather had the special honor of providing whatever



Mordechai Pinchasov



The Rebbe Rayatz

was urgently requested by the Rebbe's household.

That Purim afternoon, when my grandfather arrived to join the *farbrengen,* he personally handed the *mishloach manot* to the Rebbe. After grateful acknowledgment, the Rebbe bade my grandfather sit directly across him. In this way, my grandfather had a "front row seat" to a passionate *farbrengen,* the likes of which no one had ever before experienced on Purim.

Although he knew the Yevsektzia had begun to build their list of incriminations against him, the Rebbe publicly condemned his adversaries that Purim, frightening even his own followers with his vitriol. The Rebbe delivered a powerful speech, weeping at length and exhorting his Chassidim to educate, at the greatest self-sacrifice, their children.

"Enroll your children in *cheder* only!" he cried. "Educate them in the paths of our fathers! All Jews who hope for the coming of *Moshiach,* say *Tehillim*!"

His words so terrified the crowd that the Rebbe's mother felt obliged to enter the room and beg her son to desist. Admittedly, the Rebbe's anguish was a reaction to the innumerable obstacles disrupting his work. Informers and slanderers aided the accursed Yevsektzia in their harassment.

Due to the tightening surveillance, the arrangement of a *yechidus,* private audience, with the Rebbe was difficult. Nevertheless, in his capacity as chief operating officer of Tiferes Bachurim, my grandfather was granted that opportunity before returning to Samarkand. The Rebbe Rayatz showered my grandfather with blessings and gave him guidance on strengthening the Bukharian community. Lastly, he advised my grandfather to look for a wife among the Jewish girls in Samarkand.

Acts of Kindness

During World War Two, Reb Gavriel was completely devoted to the refugees streaming into the region. So thoroughly did he live the lessons taught by Rabbi Eliezrov and other role models as far as placing other people's needs before his own, that he breathed new life into the concept of *gemilat chasadim.*

Not content with selflessness, Reb Gavriel made sure to involve his family. He often handed his son Mordechai a wad of cash, along with simple instructions: "Go outside and give to people in need." After a half hour of distribution, Mordechai would come home to inform his father that all of the cash was gone – upon which his father gave him a new wad! This act repeated itself a number of times on any given day.



Rabbi Gavriel Niyazov, with his son Mordechai celebrating the bar mitzvah of his son Bentzion



Rabbi Yitzchak Horowitz (known as Reb Itche der Masmid)

Neither was Reb Gavriel content with temporary relief. Cognizant of the Rambam's declaration that "one who teaches another a trade is performing the greatest charitable act possible," he helped people find vocational training in various lucrative skills. Thanks to his vision and generosity, many were able to obtain livelihoods and support their families.

I remember, for example, hearing how my grandfather had helped the son of the Chassid Rabbi Yitzchak Horowitz (reverently known as Reb Itche der Masmid, one who learns constantly). His son Eliezer had approached my grandfather for help on mastering the art of weaving on the primitive looms so prevalent in Bukhara then. Like many Chassidim, he preferred jobs where he could manage independently, without government interference. Even more importantly, Eliezer knew that weavers could work in the privacy of their homes and avoid detection in their observance of Shabbos. Reb Gavriel promptly took Eliezer to an elderly Gentile Iranian, a professional weaver, and paid full price for the latter to teach Eliezer his craft.

One Shabbos, as my grandfather sat at home, the police barged in and took him away for questioning – particularly about his wife's absence at the communal harvest. (Having nationalized all private farms, the Communists launched a massive cotton growing campaign, convinced that cotton exports would bolster the economy. The arid plains of Central Asia made this crop ideal; all citizens had to contribute to this "national project," which involved days outside in the blistering sun, plucking cotton from their stalks.)

"But she is out of town," he protested. After an hour, he was begrudgingly released, and he began the long walk home.

Meanwhile, at his residence, a hungry refugee had knocked on his door. Entering, he found no one except a twelve-year-old girl called Rivkah.

"Where are your parents?" he asked.

"My father was arrested; my mother is out of town," she replied simply.

"I haven't eaten in some time," said the refugee. "Do you think I could have some food?"

The girl hastily laid a table with food and drink. When Reb Gavriel finally returned home, he found his daughter beaming with pride while a complete stranger sat eating.

"Unbelievable," exclaimed the refugee. "In any other house I would have been ordered to leave. Here, your daughter treats me like royalty."

Reb Gavriel, expecting no less from his daughter, made no comment. Later, the refugee related his experience to many others.

Reb Gavriel was not alone in his devotion. Numerous local Jews gave of themselves day and night to ease the refugees' burden. If I had to explain the psychology behind these acts, I would say that Chassidic philosophy taught us to view the less fortunate as extensions of ourselves. Charity, *tzedakah,* meant more than compassion for the less fortunate. Helping others became an integral part of our lives.

Narrow Escape

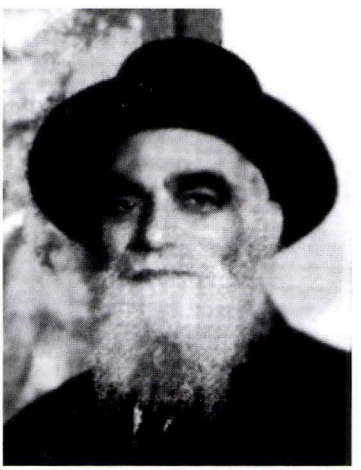
In the 1930s, as the oppression worsened, Bukharian Jewry began to explore ways to escape the country and immigrate to Eretz Yisrael. One way was jumping off a moving train near the border, followed by months of trekking through Afghanistan, Iran, or Turkey. Such an act meant physical danger and death, but these groups were usually able to bribe the driver to slow the train as it steamed along the border.



Rabbi Chananya Niyazov

After hearing that his cousin, Chananya Niyazov, had successfully made it – Chananya's daughter clinging to his neck as they rolled along the ground – later crossing two stormy rivers that separated Uzbekistan from Afghanistan, Reb Gavriel decided to try his luck. His group would cross the border near Turkey, then flee via Istanbul (also still known as Constantinopole). The total numbered twenty-three and included many members of the Niyazov family, along with Rabbis Mordechai Perlow, Avrohom Slavin, Avrohom Ber Schtiglitz, Elimelech Kaplan, and Eliezer Horowitz. There were also Rabbi Kaikov with his wife and mother, and Menachem Eliyav, Yochoi Mayzlov, and Rachamim Yeshuayov. They broke up into smaller groups in the hope of avoiding detection, and made up signs to indicate to the next group that they had crossed the border safely and that the coast would be clear.

Little did they know that their "handlers" were actually undercover GPU agents who had orchestrated an entire sting operation.



Rabbi Elimelech Kaplan

The first group of four was arrested immediately upon crossing the border. GPU agents forced them to relay the agreed-upon signs for the next group, who were duped into believing it was safe. The second group was also arrested, then coerced into leaving signs for the next group, and so on. In this way, all twenty-three people were caught.

When summoned to the interrogation room, Reb Gavriel found the walls filled with spiked belts and truncheons.

"You were caught in the act of leaving the country illegally," barked the officer. "Either you admit to your crime, or else I will have no choice but to use these." He pointed to the wall.

Reb Gavriel, accustomed to threats, knew all too well the consequences of self-incrimination. "I will not admit to anything illegal," he replied. "I got lost and I was trying to find my way through the forest."

The interrogator was little impressed. The entire group was sentenced to jail, Reb Gavriel to eighteen months.

While being transferred they passed by a group of foreign tourists. One of the Jews, fluent in the tourists' language, raised his voice and cried, "We were deceived! We are being punished as though we wanted to cross the border. We are innocent!" The shaken tourists reported the incident to the press and the story was later carried to the press in Palestine.

The international furor directly impacted Maxim Litvinov, the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs. Litvinov, the only official at that time with direct access to Stalin and his inner circle, worked diligently to forge warmer relations with France and Britain, even though Stalin himself was largely uninterested. In particular Litvinov had hoped to win his long-sought prize – formal diplomatic recognition by the United States – when suddenly confronted by the news of this arrest. Fearing American displeasure, Litvinov rushed to the embassy and sent off a telegram, demanding the release of these prisoners.

The telegram threw the police into a panic. In spite of the late hour, the commanding officer hurried to the jail and announced to the inhabitants, "Go! You're free to leave!"

The prisoners, fearing a ruse, hesitated. They knew firsthand



Left to right: Rabbi Eliezer Horowitz and Rabbi Zalman Shimon Dvorkin studying Torah

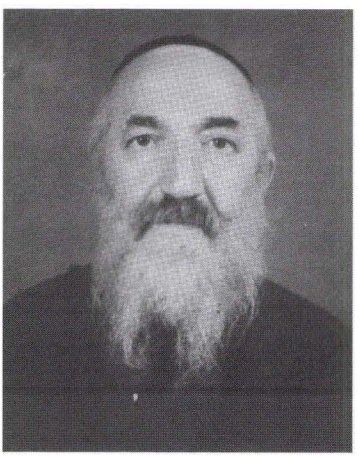
how the Soviets used the cover of darkness to cloak their murderous work. "We will not leave until morning," they declared.

They were released at dawn's first light. In the end, instead of two years, the group served a mere six-month sentence.

"Prepare to Die"

As the years went by, the iron fist of Soviet persecution tightened around Jews residing in Central Asia. Earlier in the Communist era, while their brethren in the larger Russian cities had been arrested, tortured, sent to the gulags, or murdered in cold blood, those in Tashkent and Samarkand had been largely spared. No longer.

The year 1950 became particularly brutal for Chassidim living in Tashkent and Samarkand. Many prominent figures were arrested – including my grandfather. The GPU conducted speedy trials, sending prisoners to years of hard labor in the forbidding plains of Siberia. Among the finest who were caught in this wave of arrests: Rabbis Chezkiya Kaikov, Yosef Eliav, Menachem Eliav, Avraham Chaim Ladayev, Mordechai Babajanov, Avraham Yitzchakov, Nissim Karshigi, Yochoi Yakubov, Meni Tuchni, Nissim Davidov, Emmanuel Kimyagarov, Zevulun Leviev. Within ten days, all were sentenced. (The state prosecutor had demanded a minimum of twenty-five years. The judge acquiesced, sparing only Reb Zevulun and Avraham Chaim, who received "merely" ten.)



Rabbi Avraham Chaim Ladayev

Reb Gavriel's ordeal began on the morning of Purim. On the way to his store, he noticed two other Chassidim standing somberly in the courtyard of Rabbi Kaikov. Fine-tuned to danger, he realized quickly that something was amiss. He



Rabbi Mordechai Babajanov

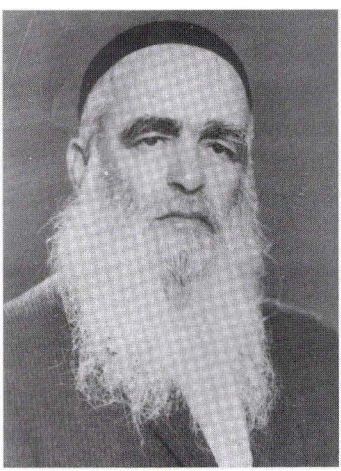
stopped off at his office to drop off some cash and then made his way over to his well-stocked store, but found it empty, with a burly Uzbek officer awaiting him.

"Close your business and follow me," the officer ordered.

Reb Gavriel had no choice but to lock the front door and follow the officer out the back exit. Sick with apprehension, he imagined someone awaiting him with a gun to shoot him dead. Instead, he found GPU officers in a black wagon, which took him to local headquarters. Reb Gavriel was escorted inside and ordered to wait.

Silence filled the office, broken only by the shuffle of papers. "Name, age," the clerks began, certifying his arrest, while relaying a message to his family of his whereabouts. Within a few hours, the family sent food, pillows, and blankets. Reb Gavriel remained in solitary confinement.

On the third day the interrogations began. Reb Gavriel hoped this signaled a progression toward some sort of verdict, but the interrogation was halted and he continued to sit alone in his cell. After an agonizing eight days, he was removed, placed under heavy guard, and taken by train to the central processing office in Tashkent. Once there, he was driven in an artificially darkened car to yet another jail, where he again was placed in solitary confinement. If these



Rabbi Zevulun Leviev

actions were designed to intimidate an already panicked prisoner, they were certainly successful.

Once again, he was ushered into an office. More forms. This time a doctor appeared and asked about any medical conditions.

"My kidneys are not functioning properly," Reb Gavriel said, fabricating a quick response in hope of some compassion. But the doctor walked away without further question or examination.

For further intimidation, Reb Gavriel was locked into a tall and narrow room, with ceiling and walls painted black and a coffin resting silently along the side. The implications were obvious: *Admit your crimes or prepare to die.*

A few hours later, the door opened. He was led into another empty room, where he waited there, alone for a day. He was then led to a cell filled with six other prisoners.

My grandfather was kept there for six months, punctuated by periodic midnight interrogations, without any stated indication about his fate.



Rabbi Zevulun Leviev (left) and Rabbi Avraham Chaim Ladayev (right)

"Do you consider yourself a Chassid?" he was asked one night.

He had been dragged from his cell to face a trio of interrogators in yet another midnight session. The room was thick with cigarette smoke. My grandfather felt tired and woozy.

"Of course not," he said, "A Chassid is a special person who has reached a very high level of spiritual righteousness. I am not that kind of person."

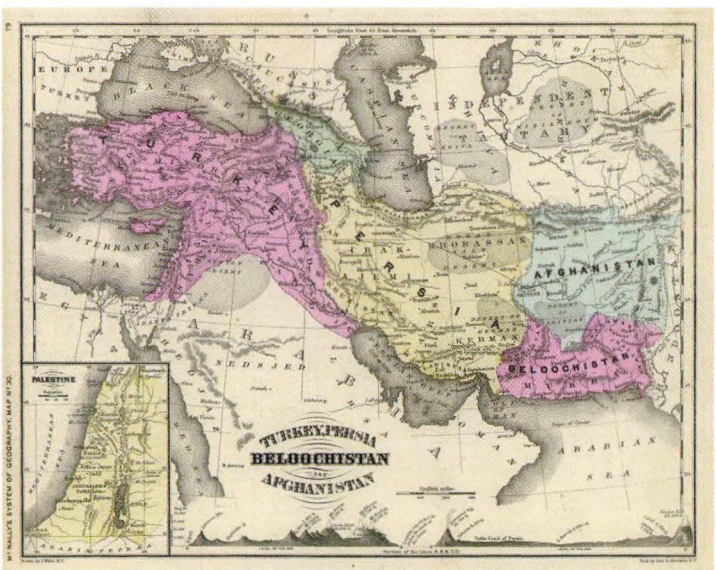
"Stop with your lies!" one of the trio shouted. "Quit wasting our time. Admit the truth: you are a Chassid."

And so it went, back and forth, the interrogators insisting Reb Gavriel was a Chassid, which he constantly refuted.

"We have proof you are a Chassid," the interrogators finally said. "We have possession of some letters you wrote to Chassidim living in Jerusalem."

"More lies," retorted Reb Gavriel. "I never wrote to anyone in Israel."

"We have proof right here!" one of them argued. "I have three letters here in your handwriting, addressed to Chassidim living in Israel."



Map of Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey

Reb Gavriel's heart sank at the ominous revelation. Seeing no alternative, he decided to deny everything in a futile attempt to confuse his captors.

"You may have some letters," he declared, "but they are definitely not mine. I never wrote them."

"If so, how did you find out about your brother's death in Jerusalem in 1948?"

"Not from a letter addressed to me. Someone had written to Rabbi Kaikov and he passed the information onto me."

He calmly explained: he was praying in the synagogue, when he spied a group of fellow congregants huddled together, shooting glances in his direction. Suddenly Emmanuel Kanai – one of his friends – approached him, clapped him on the back, and announced, "Come, let's go drink a cup of tea at your house."

"As we were walking," Reb Gavriel described, "he broke the news to me. By the time I came home, I found it filled with friends waiting to comfort me on this tragic loss."

In accordance with Jewish law, he continued, he only had to sit in mourning for an hour, as too much time had lapsed in the interim. "So they had gathered in my home to console me," Reb



Political Prisoners at work in a stone quarry near the train tracks in the gulags of Norilsk

Gavriel concluded. "That's all that happened. I have no contact with any Zionists, and I never wrote to anyone in Israel."

He managed to keep his voice placid and detached – totally belying the frantic pounding of his heart – but his performance made no impression on his interrogators. One of them bolted from his chair, purple with rage, and thrust a finger in my grandfather's face.

"You dare to make fun of us here?" he bellowed. "Are you crazy? You call yourselves *Sitra d'Kedusha* [side of holiness] while you call us *Sitra Achra* [evil side]! You think we don't know that you consider yourselves G-d's elite when you say 'You have chosen us from all people'? Are we lowly rustics?"

The interrogator paused for breath, and with shaking hands lit a new cigarette and lowered himself back into his seat.

"It will go much better for you if you admit the truth," he continued, in honeyed tones. "We know you taught Torah to groups of Jews; we know everything about you. Own up to your crimes or prepare for the worst."

With almost superhuman effort Reb Gavriel maintained a calm, stoic face. "Lies and fabrications," he said dismissively. "Who has been feeding you all this about me? Had you properly investigated, you would have found me to be a busy merchant with no time for religious activities."

The interrogator glared at Reb Gavriel with undisguised venom. "Just sit there and wait," he muttered, "and I will soon bring in fifteen people to testify against you."

Reb Gavriel almost confessed right then and there. But realizing that as many people as possible could be incriminated, he continued to protest his innocence.

"So who sits next to you in the synagogue?" a different officer asked, suddenly changing tactics. "Are they the same people sitting in your jail cell right now?"

Sensing a trap, Reb Gavriel remained silent.

The officer sneered. "So now you refuse to answer?"

Silence. Exasperated, the officer rapped on the table and two guards appeared.

"Get him out of my sight!" he barked. "Put him back in his cell."

These intermittent interrogations were the only interruptions of a monotonous life in jail. Prisoners understood full well their purpose: to lure them into self-incrimination. Keeping a mental record of everything said was difficult, and the interrogators extensively recorded every word, which was used to trip up the prisoners.

With no schedule, the air of uncertainty made prison life even more unbearable. The same questions ran, over and over, in the minds of the incarcerated: *How long will I be here? Will I ever see my family again? Will I be sentenced to death or exile?*

Sentenced prisoners would return to their cells in perversely joyous relief: better to be sentenced than to languish in jail. It was precisely in situations like these that my grandfather felt most grateful for his Chassidic education, which imbued him with faith in Divine Providence. Awareness of the Hand guiding him, orchestrating every stage of his life, made his incarceration all the more tolerable.

After a few days, Reb Gavriel saw Rabbi Kaikov being led down the hallway for questioning. From the latter's drawn appearance, my grandfather belatedly understood why he had seen people in the rabbi's courtyard on the day of his own arrest: the eminent rabbi had already met the same fate. Although they caught each other's eye, it was dangerous to show even a flicker of recognition. Chassidim later learned that Rabbi Kaikov was tortured and pressured to reveal the names of those who had attended a thanksgiving gathering to celebrate the release (12 Tammuz) of the Rebbe Rayatz from Soviet jail.

Over time, conditions of Reb Gavriel's imprisonment worsened. When Pesach neared, officials suddenly announced they would cease accepting food packages for any prisoner, Jew or Gentile alike. Chassidim were not fooled: they knew all too well that this decree would bring them to the breaking point of starvation.

That year, the first days of Pesach coincided with Shabbos and Sunday. Prisoners spoke in reverential whispers about Reb Gorodetsky, who was sitting in the same prison. Locked in his cell, he had not tasted a morsel over Pesach, somehow surviving on water alone.

Reb Gavriel and others were able to fast the first few days. But by the fourth, they were so weak that they allowed themselves a little butter and sugar. Eating such rich food after prolonged abstinence wreaked havoc on my grandfather, nearly killing him with severe stomach cramps.

After Pesach, his interrogators tried all kinds of physiological trickery to get him to confess. They woke him at all hours of the night, dragging him off for more questioning. One late evening, they called him out, ordering him to sit on a bench in the hallway. They placed him near a basin of water clogged with cigarette butts and spent matches – making him gag every time he took a breath.

While his concentration was thus diverted, an unfamiliar prisoner calling himself Mordechai sat down on the same bench. Immediately Reb Gavriel sensed a trap: this person must be an informer.

My grandfather watched warily as the latter sat down heavily on the bench. Mordechai began with a series of questions: *How are you feeling? What is your profession? How is your family?* Completely repulsed, Reb Gavriel's head began to spin. He had to find a way to avoid incrimination, yet refuse to play along with this latest and most dangerous tactic of his oppressors. The only thing he could think of was silence. Anything the prisoner said – be it question, comment, or complaint – was met by an impenetrable wall of silence. No hedging, no excuses, no answers – only silence.

In frustration, Mordechai finally said to Reb Gavriel, "Go back to your cell. Don't think you made things easier with your stubbornness. You will yet pay for your silence."

Other prisoners endured similar deceptions. There were whispers of drugged cigars, medicated drinks, and other ploys.

Sometimes, members of the same family would be arrested together and then interrogated separately, in an attempt to find discrepancies among their stories. Telling a son that his elderly father, or mother, had succumbed and confessed was another ruse, causing prisoners to capitulate to their interrogators' demands.

This form of recruitment was a no-win situation. Obviously, my grandfather could not agree to become a Soviet agent. Yet refusal to work for the government – usually in the comfort of one's own home and business – was tantamount to anti-Soviet declaration, especially when the offer came cloaked in an opportunity to help maintain government control over its citizens.

Prisoner 629

One a.m. The door to Reb Gavriel's cell creaked open. After being asked for his identifying sign – all prisoners were given a number or initial – he was taken to yet another interrogation chamber, this time on the third floor of the prison. The guards



Building named after Lenin in city of of Norilsk

subjected him first to an intense body search – as if he could have somehow smuggled in contraband – before leading him to a large room where a group of officers sat, including Mordechai.

"The interrogations are over," they announced. "You were tried in absentia. Many people testified against you, confirming your involvement in the most serious of counter-revolutionary activities.

"Although we understand that you are not an accomplished Talmudic scholar and that you never formally studied in yeshiva, your knowledge of Judaism and communal involvement is much more pronounced than others' in the city.

"We know everything about you. Refusing to answer our questions did you no favors. In fact, you will now learn what a grave error you made by your childish behavior.

"From now on, you are Prisoner no. 629. You have been sentenced to hard labor in the city of Norilsk."

Reb Gavriel felt lightheaded. His future had finally been decided, his fate sealed. Gone were the questions and the doubts, replaced by the hard reality of the smelting factories and coal mines that awaited.

He was escorted back to his cell, where prisoners anxiously waited. The news was greeted by dismay. Everyone agreed he was facing a particularly cruel and difficult sentence. In spite of the devastating news, Reb Gavriel responded with perfect equanimity and the trust that G-d would protect him.

Norilsk, northernmost city in the world, located between Western and Central Siberia – the permafrost zone – was known for its relentless subarctic climate with an almost year-long blanket of snow. Blizzards lasted for days on end. For two months the sun disappeared and the temperatures could plummet to minus sixty degrees, Fahrenheit.

Very few trees grew in Norilsk. Transportation was dogsled – horses could never survive the brutal climate – and an underdressed person could freeze to death in under five minutes. The remoteness of the region was underscored by the Soviets' inability to settle the area until the 1930s. Even in earlier times

the Czars, although aware of the region's enormous natural reserves, had known little how to extract them, given the sheer horror of life in such places.

Reb Gavriel and his friend Zevulun joined two thousand prisoners crammed onto a ship built for transporting livestock. On that ship were the lowest elements of the human race – violent criminals and murderers. At one point, the ringleader decided that the two Chassidim deserved a beating for asking if someone had taken their coats. Both Reb Gavriel and Zevulun, knowing the ship officers would turn a blind eye to their accidental death, scrambled to hide. After spending a few hours in search of the pair, the ruffians gave up and moved onto their next focus of interest.

The call of port for Reb Gavriel's ship was Krasnoyarsk, Eastern Siberia. During World War Two, dozens of factories had been evacuated from Ukraine and Western Russia and transplanted there. The area included a dockyard, a hydroelectric power station, and the river port.

Throughout the Soviet years, even before the war, Krasnoyarsk was one of the places for political exiles. Although it was Lenin who had built the first gulags, in 1918, it was Stalin in particular who had made Krasnoyarsk a major center for the gulag system. This was connected to his scheme of collectivization – driving peasants off their land – which resulted in a labor shortage and the shipping of these "enemies of the state" north for economic uses.

When the Soviet Union found itself bereft of coal, gas, and minerals – most of which lay in the far north – the solution? Prisoner labor! Had civilians been used, adequate housing would have had to be constructed. All the prisoners needed, on the other hand, were primitive barracks, each with a stove and a chimney.

As Reb Gavriel and Zevulun disembarked, prison officials stopped them and asked, "Were you beaten on the ship?" Warily the pair said nothing had occurred, and were steered toward

a waiting train which hurtled toward Norilsk, soot and smoke blowing through the barred windows. The trip took fifteen days.

Arrival at Norilsk seemed like something out of a storybook. The area was filled with the simplest, most rustic people, who had no concept of personal hygiene. Some dwelled in tents constructed out of reindeer skins. Every part of the reindeer, in fact, was used for bare necessities – hats, boots, coats, tents. Antlers were made into tools. As vegetation could not grow in this climate, these people survived on a diet of meat and fish.

Initially Reb Gavriel was apprenticed to a local tailor, a relatively easy job in the warm indoors. But his luck did not last long. After two months, he was ordered to join a group of prisoners working in the lime pits. This was highly hazardous: every day, workers wore special clothing and goggles that protected them from the toxic, sulfuric fumes. The Soviets heavily used lime in their building, masonry and engineering materials, and prisoners were forced to work the quarries to keep up with the lack of supply.

The work was exhausting. Prisoners spent entire days in freezing elements, cutting the limestone to the right size and slacking it – mixing it with the correct amount of water. The pit, several feet deep, was left uncovered, with no guards or guardrails to keep prisoners from stumbling and falling to their deaths.

Reb Gavriel, like all the others, worked twelve-hour shifts. There were no meals, no rest breaks. A line of squarely built trucks stretched around the quarry, waiting to transport the prepared limestones to various locations. Placing the trucks around the quarries was a tactic to increase pressure on the prisoners – as though the trucks were calling out, *Hurry up! We are ready to leave!* At the end of his shift, Reb Gavriel could do nothing more than drag himself back to bed and collapse.

At Norilsk and other camps, measures were taken to dehumanize the prisoners in the eyes of the guards. Even when inspectors expressed outrage at the pitiful conditions, which in turn caused a drop in production quotas, little was done. Back

in Moscow, the bureaucrats knew in great detail what the camps were like, but cared little.

Reb Gavriel survived. Weeks blended into months. After a half year of daily labor in the quarries, he began to wonder if his body could last much longer. Many prisoners had already expired.

Then, one day, a train arrived, filled to capacity with new prisoners. They were drafted to work at the mines, while Reb Gavriel was given a much easier job at tailoring. No longer did he have to stand on his feet all day in frigid temperatures.

Winter set in. Norilsk turned into a world of ice, the mountains into impassible fortresses. Walking outside became unbearable: fierce winds could knock down even the sturdiest person, magnifying the working hazards. Yet, purposely during this dangerous time, Reb Gavriel was ordered to fill a new position – clearing snow off the train tracks.

Interestingly, the Hebrew letters for USSR have the same numerical value of the Hebrew word for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*. So too, in that permafrost climate, such tortured labor brought to mind the labor to our ancestors. The snow never stopped falling. Compounding the difficulty, the train tracks had been built to run through the valley; this meant that heavy snow fell from the mountains onto the snow already on the tracks.

In our modern society, workers could consult a train schedule and arrange their responsibilities accordingly. My grandfather, however, had never heard of such a luxury. Train schedules simply did not exist; locomotives could come steaming through at any time of the day or night. Therefore, the tracks had to be completely – and constantly – free of snow.

Despite the dangers, Reb Gavriel actually found this newest arrangement well worth his effort. In recognition of his efficient maintenance of the railroad system, he was given a heated, fully insulated room near the train tracks. While other prisoners huddled in crude huts, he could enjoy a warm room with a comfortable bed. Like a thirsty traveler comforted by the knowledge of the water canister at his side, Reb Gavriel felt relieved as he

worked in the snow and sleet, knowing that an inviting room lay at his disposal.

As the winter progressed, with temperatures plummeting, all the labor at the quarry was halted. Not Reb Gavriel's. He was forced to work even when the temperature reached sixty below zero. A lesser person would have never survived.

Every time he voiced hope, other prisoners laughed at his naiveté. "I was sentenced to twenty years," a prisoner retorted, "and I'm still here serving my time. You were sentenced to twenty-*five* years, and you just got here. Don't think you are getting out anytime soon." Another one told him, "Just like my eyes can't see my ears, I don't put faith in nonsense. If by any miracle you do get out of here early, I'm going to convert."

Despite the naysayers, my grandfather continued believing that G-d would orchestrate his release.

Two years passed. The backbreaking work in the horrendous outdoors took a toll on Reb Gavriel. Falling ill, he was taken to a hospital. To his good fortune, the government had just begun to ease some of its harshest laws toward sick prisoners. Until then, illnesses and deaths mattered only as far as their impact on the camp's production. Anyone sick was useless. The commanders were particularly cruel in their assessment that the sick or disabled were fakers. Doctors were encouraged to identify them; those perceived to be soft on prisoners who saw hospitals as sanctuaries were punished.

Now, however, according to the new rules, a sick prisoner could ask for a reduced sentence and apply for transfer to a different gulag. When the doctors concurred that my grandfather could no longer stay in the harsh climate of Norilsk, his transfer was approved, and he was allowed to recuperate in Krasnoyarsk. In line with Soviet protocol, the doctors sent his medical files to the appropriate offices in Moscow to decide whether he deserved to stay in the gulags for his "crimes," or to inform the family of his condition and ask if they wished to care for him at home.

My grandfather had faith that he would receive a suspended sentence and return home. But time went by without a word from Moscow, and the doctors had no choice but to release him to a work camp near Krasnoyarsk. My grandfather returned to work, waiting impatiently for news of his release.

And then, the unthinkable occurred.

The Revolt

In 1953, as the months thawed toward more tolerable temperatures, one of the camp guards overheard an inmate deliver a message over the fence separating the men's camps from the women's. A shot rang out and the inmate dropped dead. This shooting provoked an uprising that became famous as the first within the gulags. The Norilsk Uprising later led to the closure of the entire gulag system, an empire of suffering and heartbreak to millions.

Thanks to the revolt, the camp gates remained open, although prisoners had no method of escape. Alarms went off



The Norilsk uprising as the "Bandera" raised the biggest revolt in the Gulag

every night. Troops tried infiltrating the camp to seal it off, but they were repulsed. The lack of sleep made the prisoners unfocused and exhausted. Tensions grew; some men actually broke down. So full was the hospital that men lay on the grass outside.

Most prisoners had been sentenced to the so-called Bandera Standard – twenty-five years' hard labor. Lacking weapons, their actions included a wide spectrum of nonviolent forms of protest: meetings, letters to the government, hunger strikes. Camp authorities tried to quell the Norilsk unrest, but it continued unabated. Soon sympathy strikes broke out in other camps. The leaders demanded a meeting with top Moscow officials. Agitated, the authorities dispatched telegrams to the capital. Within two months, loudspeakers announced the arrival of a special commission from Moscow, which was greeted by a committee of inmates with a list of demands – i.e. review of all sentences, improved conditions, windows without bars, removal of prisoner numbers.

The head of the commission sneered. "This revolt is useless. We can easily suppress you by force. There will be no changes."

Determined to continue the standoff, the strike leaders almost walked out of the conference. But then one of the commission members rose and announced that the entire issue of political prisoners in camp was under review.

"Stalin is dead," he continued smoothly. "We are looking to make changes."

The prisoners eyed him warily. They knew the importance of their labor – the production of nickel, platinum, and other metals – and doubted the authorities would simply give in. Their fears were well founded. In spite of the pledges, the regime decided to apply military force.

In all, after a month of freedom within camp walls, periodic negotiations, and preparations for violent conflict, Soviet tanks rolled in, along with live artillery. Nearly seven hundred people were killed or wounded – although official figures claimed only a "few dozen" lives. Ivanov, the Northern Territory party chief, eventually managed to quash the uprising.

During this time, my grandfather happened to be sitting in an administrative office, awaiting a large sum of money sent by his family. Although prison rules explicitly allowed money transfers, these were not released until production output of the *entire* unit – usually around twenty people – had been deemed sufficient. Rules like these were additional arrows in the arsenal of intimidation.

My grandfather never allowed a morsel of non-kosher food to touch his lips. This was a superhuman feat, something he could have only achieved thanks to the ideals he learned in Tomchei Tmimim. Although he was in a truly life-threatening situation that might have granted him leniency, the concept of eating *treif* never even occurred to him. He survived on bread, sardines, and water – items purchased with money he received from his family. His wife – my grandmother Chana – would sometimes be able to send him bread-and-sardine food packages as well.

(My grandmother had a unique full name. It was actually Chana Istam (*ee-stam*), which means "independence." It also means "to exist." Her mother had suffered through many miscarriages, so at the full-term, healthy birth of this baby, her parents added "Istam" to her name – symbolizing their prayer that the miscarriages should stop and that their newborn should be blessed with a healthy life.)

Due to the revolt, the brigadier instructed all prisoners in the camp to sleep fully clothed. "An emergency might erupt any night," he said. "You can't spare time getting dressed."

Once, in the dead of the night, the brigadier entered the barracks and ordered all the prisoners outside. Sleepy and disoriented, they were caught completely off guard when troops opened fire. Eighty were immediately killed.

"Stand together!" someone yelled. "If we are one group, they won't dare shoot at us." All the prisoners rushed to form a single group, and the shooting stopped.

The Norilsk gulags were surrounded by troops. The prisoners later learned that, in other camps as well, soldiers had

opened fire. Those responsible for the killing of unarmed prisoners included some of the most prominent members of the Soviet military, and generated massive outcry that led to the dismantling of the gulag system. Black flags appeared over the barracks as signs of mourning for the murdered.

Shaken, the prisoners decided to continue the uprising. It ended after two weeks when, suddenly, orders came to disband the group of prisoners. Camp commanders realized that the only way to break the strike was by severing the ties of unity. All those whose sentences were lighter – less than fifteen years – were taken away and never seen again. Those with more severe sentences were divided into groups of thirty and ordered to march under armed guard to different camps.

My grandfather was in the latter group. Perhaps the soldiers were either embarrassed by the act of killing unarmed men, or impressed by their courage. Either way, the soldiers had become more courteous. They allowed the group frequent rest breaks along the way, even conversing with them about prison life.

After marching for half a day, the group halted outside a new prison camp. A black flag fluttered in the wind, symbol of the resistance.

"We're all going to be murdered here," someone whispered to Reb Gavriel.

After ten days, all prisoners were ordered to line up outdoors. There they stood for two days while the commanders divided the camp into two: one group would go to another camp with a lighter workload; the second – the troublemakers – to a particularly horrific gulag whence few ever emerged alive. A table was set up and a trio of commanders sat behind it, deciding the fate of each prisoner.

When Reb Gavriel was called, he approached the table, barely able to drag his feet.

"You will join the second group," said one of the commanders.

Miraculously, another commander whirled around. "No, no. Not him. He belongs in the first group."

Thus Reb Gavriel gained a new lease on life.

Prisoners sent to the second group were immediately pounced on by ferocious guards who beat them, confiscated their meager possessions, and tossed them a metal plate and spoon to keep for the remainder of their imprisonment. (Years later, my grandfather met someone from that second group and heard firsthand of the inhumane conditions and daily harassment.)

Dream of Freedom

Nevertheless, in the new camp, things did not improve for Reb Gavriel. His teeth began falling out. His stomach ailment had never improved; he could barely keep down whatever he ate, and he continued losing weight. One night, as he tossed and turned in pain, he staggered out of bed and dragged himself to the infirmary.

The doctor shrugged. "I will give you a pill for the pain, but you are already a dead man. There is no medicine that can cure your condition."

Reb Gavriel went back to bed. He fell asleep and dreamed that he was walking down a large promenade with shuttered stores on both sides. Colorful flowers were in bloom; birds chirped in the trees. An imposing guard stood in the middle of the promenade; in one hand he held a folder, in the other a ring of keys. Reb Gavriel intuited that the keys would open the shops. He watched as the guard went around opening all the stores before disappearing from view.

"What is this?" Reb Gavriel thought. "Where are the storekeepers? Why aren't they guarding their merchandise?"

Walking further down, he met a group of Arab storekeepers in traditional attire, setting out their wares. Exiting the promenade, he found himself in a beautiful garden. Children frolicked in a fountain, shrieking in delight. Train tracks appeared and Reb Gavriel suddenly awoke, bathed in sweat.

"Arabs are called *Yishma'elim* in the Torah," he mused. "*Yishma'el* means 'G-d hearkens.' This means G-d will hear my plight. Children are a sign of happiness. This means I will hear

good tidings." He continued thinking in this vein, convincing himself that the dream portended his upcoming release.

He turned to a Muslim, a friend of his, sleeping in the same barracks. "Listen, Ali. I just had a good dream. I'm going home soon."

Ali sat up in shock. "I'm washing my hands. Then tell me your dream."

Misery makes strange company. After Reb Gavriel related the dream, Ali gazed at him with respect. "It is a good dream!" he exclaimed. "Something is bound to happen."

That Friday night, as Reb Gavriel was sitting and eating, an officer suddenly entered and approached the brigadier.

"Who is Niyazov?" he asked.

When the brigadier pointed to my grandfather, the officer walked over and confronted him. "How long is your sentence?"

"Twenty-five years."

"Follow me."

Reb Gavriel followed him into a room, where sat a female officer.

"Take his picture," she ordered the guard. "I want him here in my office first thing tomorrow morning."

His picture taken, Reb Gavriel returned to the barracks, where he spent a sleepless night wondering what the next day would bring.

Early the next morning, Reb Gavriel returned to the office. It was deserted.

He then did the unthinkable. Standing there, in the office belonging to the gulag commanders, he *davened Shacharis.*

Barely had he finished when the door swung open and the female commander entered with a bulky folder and the open doors in his dream. She sat behind her desk, shuffled a few papers, and then stared at him.

"You are free," she said flatly. "Where do you want to go?"

Reb Gavriel burst into tears. At least, G-d had heard his prayers. "I want to go home, back to Samarkand."

"It will be done," she replied. "Go collect your belongings."

Trembling with excitement, my grandfather returned to his barracks. News of his release spread like wildfire; all the prisoners gathered to shake his hand and wish him well. Ali was particularly devastated: the two had become very close during their years of incarceration, and he would miss Reb Gavriel greatly.

(Ali later corresponded with my grandfather. After many years, Reb Gavriel noticed a familiar face roaming the aisles of his store: it was Ali! After an emotional reunion, my grandfather invited Ali to his home for a meal. He listened intently as Ali described the years of hardship in the gulags and his current futile attempts to find a livelihood.

"I will set you up with some apple farmers in nearby Alma Ata," Reb Gavriel offered, remembering the kindness he had received at the hands of this Gentile. The region was noted for fertile apple orchards; *Alma Ata* comes from the Kazakh word for "apple" and is often translated as "full of apples." Ali was able to support himself comfortably for the rest of his life.)

After Shabbos, Reb Gavriel boarded a bus to Krasnoyarsk. From there, he would have to take another bus to the train station and board a train to Tashkent.

At the bus station, he noticed a soldier with Jewish features. After introductions were made, the solder agreed to accompany Reb Gavriel to Krasnoyarsk and protect him from all harm.

My grandfather sent off telegrams to his family about his release, but a rude surprise awaited him in Krasnoyarsk. The conductor refused to issue him a ticket, explaining that he was awaiting a new batch of free passes for newly released prisoners.

"Where do I stay until then?" asked Reb Gavriel in disappointment. "You expect me to sleep outdoors in the train station?"

The conductor waved his hand toward a line of freestanding cars behind the station. "That's the 'hotel,'" he said. "Get a room there."

Reb Gavriel tried to reserve a "room," but the "hotel manager" would not give him a key without a passport.

"But I just got freed from prison!" my grandfather protested.

"Here are my release papers. I don't have a passport!"

Soon the conductor came over to investigate. He shouted something coarse at the manager, who meekly issued Reb Gavriel a room for the sum of fifteen rubles a day. Barely had Reb Gavriel entered his "room," however, when his stomach cramps came back in full force and he doubled over in pain. The manager called for a doctor.

The doctor hurried over and examined Reb Gavriel, shaking his head in despair. "You are really sick. I should have you admitted into a hospital."

"Don't talk to me about the hospital!" Reb Gavriel gasped. "I've been sick in the gulag for long enough to know what works. Give me an injection of camphor."

The doctor opened his bag and administered an injection. "Eat a lot of mandarins. That, and drink a lot of milk. These foods will help cure your stomach."

After five days of traveling, Reb Gavriel reached Tashkent. He went directly to his sister's house, where cries of joy greeted him from the many gathered friends and relatives. From Tashkent he went to Samarkand, where he found groups of family and friends awaiting him at the entrance of the Jewish quarter. Noticing the pained looks of his friends' wives, Reb Gavriel assured them that, soon, their husbands would also be returning home.

My grandfather's words proved to be prophetic. Within a short time after Stalin's death, a power struggle broke out among the new leadership, ending in the election of Nikita Khrushchev. He adopted a series of reforms – one of which was an amnesty for over a million prisoners! Khrushchev also adopted a more moderate approach toward those accused of anti-Soviet religious activities, leading to the release of many Chassidim who had been arrested during that period.

Life Parable

Reb Gavriel returned home broken in body – emaciated, weighing less than eighty pounds – yet complete in spirit. He

had served a fifth of his original sentence. Years later, people would approach him and ask the same question: *What were you thinking when they sentenced you to twenty-five years' hard labor? What did you feel when they shortened your sentence? What was your reaction when you heard those special words, 'You are free'?"*

Always he would answer: "Although there are no words that can describe those feelings, I can relate to an incident I once read in a book of Jewish stories."

> An impoverished couple lived with their many children in a hovel. Rain and snow leaked through the roof; wind howled through the broken windows. When another child was born, the father started to lose hope, for he had barely been able to keep his family fed.
>
> "I prefer death to living such a life," he cried to the rabbi. "Have mercy on a starving family."
>
> Moved to tears, the rabbi sent him home and went out during a blizzard to visit the richest man in town. A liveried butler opened the door to usher him inside, but the rabbi refused to enter.



Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov acting as Sandek in Brooklyn

"Tell your master I am waiting for him on the doorstep," he instructed, ignoring the biting wind and snow that swirled through the open door.

The magnate, dressed in a thin shirt, came to the door and begged the rabbi to come inside. "You are freezing up the entire house," he said. "I've never felt so cold in my life; please come inside so we can shut the door."

The rabbi ignored him. "There is an impoverished family in town on the brink of starvation. I need a donation from you so we can buy them food, fix their home, and supply them with enough firewood to make it through this terrible winter."

The magnate could feel icicles pierce his clothing as the wind blew arctic air into the house. "I will donate everything you ask for," he promised, "but please come inside."

The rabbi ignored him. "They just had a baby boy and the *bris,* circumcision, will be in a few days. I will host it in my home. I will be the *mohel,* circumciser; you will be the *sandek,* the one holding the baby. But I need you to pay for all the expenses."

The rich man was almost reduced to tears by the intense cold. "Anything you ask for, it will be done," he replied humbly. "Please come inside!"

The rabbi ignored him and returned to his wagon. The magnate hastily shut the door and ordered his servants to fill up the rabbi's wagon with food, drink, and firewood. Soon the magnate emerged, clad in a thick fur coat and tall leather boots, and climbed into the rabbi's wagon. They sat in silence as they traveled to the pauper's home.

When they arrived, the rich man could not believe his eyes. Never had he seen such poverty. The house looked as though it could collapse any minute. Inside, children lay strewn around the floor on straw mats. There was no food, no furniture.

The magnate stood there, mouth agape. Snow fell in from the ceiling. The windows were stuffed with rags, ineffectually blocking the cold. Children were crying from hunger.

Something broke within his heart. "This is intolerable!"

Immediately he secured an empty house in the area. His servants arrived and helped move the entire family in, along with food, furniture, and firewood. They left behind a family transformed.

At the *bris*, after being honored to serve as the *sandek*, the rich man turned to the rabbi and said, "Tell me, why didn't you come into my house? You know how much I revere you. I did everything you asked."

The rabbi replied with a story of his own:

"A king once heavily disguised himself and crossed over the border to spy on his warring neighbors. To his ill fortune, he was recognized by the border patrol and began fleeing for his life. Seeing the soldiers hot on his heels, he rushed into the little house of a Jewish blacksmith and pleaded, 'Hide me quickly, before they kill me!'

"The blacksmith did not recognize the king. But, like a good Jew, he acted quickly to save a stranger's life. 'Crawl into my bed under the feather comforter. Lie still and don't move!'

"After the king climbed into bed, the tailor covered him with one feather comforter, and another, and a third and fourth as well.

"Suddenly the door flew open and two soldiers with spears rushed in. 'Has anyone come in here?'

"'In here?' the Jew repeated dumbly. 'Who would come here?'

"The soldiers searched quickly, even stabbing through the feather comforters a few times for good measure. Finding no one, they ran out to continue the chase elsewhere.

"When they were truly gone, the king crept out from under the comforters, pale and trembling. 'Because you saved me from certain death, you can ask me for anything, and I will grant your wish! For now, I have to return to my country. I will yet send for you.'

"The king managed to return to his palace unscathed. After delivering his enemies a resounding defeat, he sent for the Jewish blacksmith and gave him full control of shoeing all the horses in the army. The blacksmith now became wealthy, and he visited the king often to dine.

"One day, as they were dining together, the Jew said: 'I'd like to know how you felt lying in my bed when the soldiers struck their swords through the bedcovers?'

"The king was outraged. 'How dare you! No one speaks to me like that! For your impudence I'll have you hung!' He

immediately called a couple of his soldiers, who clapped the blacksmith in irons and took him away.

"The Jew cried all night. He said *vidui,* confession, and prepared himself for death. The next morning, his hands were tied and he was strung up on the gallows.

"Just as the executioner raised his arm and started counting, the king appeared and strode to the gallows.

"'Tell me, my good friend,' he said kindly to the quivering blacksmith. 'You recognize the feeling you have right now? *That* is precisely how I felt lying in your bed, when the soldiers were sticking their spears into the bedcovers.'"

Concluded the rabbi: "That is why I made you freeze by the door while I asked for help in saving this poor family. Only by experiencing their plight firsthand could you truly empathize. And you certainly did."

After finishing the story, Reb Gavriel found that he never needed to say another word. Listeners always understood the message.



Rabbi Gavriel Niyazov receiving Kos Shel Brachah from the Rebbe

Against all Odds

In 5732 (1972), Reb Gavriel was finally able to leave the Iron Curtain and move to the city of Netanya in Eretz Yisrael. His arrival there did not scale back his dedication to the community. The Chassidic teachings he had gleaned from Rabbis Eliezrov and Gorodetsky gave him no rest. There too, in the Holy Land, he was widely revered by the Bukharian community. Everyone continued to call him by his nickname, *O'chil'dee* – the reference to his open, accepting nature and heart full of love toward every Jew. For the remainder of his life, people gravitated toward the inspirational figure who, against all odds, had done so much for Yiddishkeit, as his story continued to motivate others in their observance of Torah and mitzvoth.

Shortly after his arrival, Reb Gavriel was contacted by Agudath Israel of America, whose annual dinner – a highlight for Orthodox Jewry in New York – was fast approaching. Would Reb Gavriel agree to attend? He would be part of a group being honored for maintaining Yiddishkeit behind the Iron Curtain. Reb Gavriel immediately seized the opportunity. He, along with Menachem Levayov and Yitzchak Zilber, boarded a flight to New York.



Right to Left: Rabbis Shlomo Chai Niyazov, Emmunel Ladayov, Reuven Abramov and Binyamin Niyazov

A delegation awaited them at the airport. Their arrival was celebrated with much fanfare, and then the group drove off to 770 Eastern Parkway to meet with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. During their *yechidus,* private audience, the Rebbe instructed the group to speak about the activities of Chabad in the Soviet Union.

Attending a dinner for American Jewry was certainly something new for the group. Upon their arrival at the hall, they were thunderstruck at the sight of some of the greatest Jewish scholars – Rabbis Moshe Feinstein and Joseph Ber Soloveitchik – gracing the dais. As the group was introduced, my grandfather became afraid to deliver his remarks, worried that family members left behind might be punished for his public condemnation of Soviet policy. Instead, Menachem Levayov spoke as the group representative; in this way, no repercussions would befall the Niyazovs still living in Samarkand.

Passionately Reb Menachem described how Chabad – and Chabad alone – kept the torch of Yiddishkeit ablaze under



Rabbis Moshe Feinstein and Joseph Ber Soloveitchik

religious repression in Russia. He focused on the outstanding work of Rabbis Eliezrov and Gorodetsky in the isolated cities of Samarkand and Tashkent. His speech made a tremendous impact on the crowd, a public sanctification of the work of Chabad across the Soviet Union.

For the remainder of his life, Reb Gavriel continued traveling to the Rebbe every two or three years – in all, almost a dozen times. Whenever he entered *yechidus*, the Rebbe showered him with blessings.

His children also merited special attention from the Rebbe. Once, when Reb Gavriel's daughter Rivka was unable to secure a *yechidus,* she sent in a letter with her brother Binyamin, who had already been designated a time slot. She wrote in her mother tongue and Binyamin handed the Rebbe the note, along with his own.

"Do you understand Russian?" the Rebbe asked Binyamin.

"Yes, I do."

"Your sister asked four questions," the Rebbe continued. "Should I tell you the answers now or send them to her later?"

"You can tell me now."

"Since she asked four questions, and you may forget some details of my answers, take a pencil and paper to write down what I will tell you."

Binyamin froze. His teachers and mentors had prepared him adequately for *yechidus* – but no one had mentioned anything about coming with a pencil and paper! To the boy's astonishment, the Rebbe opened his desk drawer, removed a pencil and pad of paper, slid them over to Binyamin, and began, "The answer to her first question is . . . ."

The scene was surreal. The Lubavitcher Rebbe was dictating answers to a yeshiva *bachur* with a pen and paper supplied by the Rebbe himself!

After completing all four answers, the Rebbe asked kindly, "Was everything clear enough?"

"Yes," stammered Binyamin. He had always heard of the Rebbe's concern for every individual. Now he had witnessed it

firsthand. Exiting the Rebbe's room, Binyamin could not help but be awed.

Reb Gavriel taught a Tanya class every day at his synagogue in Netanya. On Shabbos mornings in his youth, back in the synagogue of Samarkand, he had attended a *shiur* in the Alter Rebbe's *Likuttei Torah,* given by Rabbi Kaikov; now, in a different land and different time, he gave well-attended Shabbos morning *shiurim* in *Likuttei Torah.*

Although Reb Gavriel passed away in the spring of 5759 (1999), his *shiurim* continue today, as well as the golden chain of Chassidus that fortified Bukhara's Jews against their oppressors. In Eretz Yisrael and elsewhere, his *shiurim* are taught by the descendants of those self-sacrificing pioneers.

Part
FOUR

Chapter
TEN

TRUE WARRIOR

Although Chassidim lived with fervor, and the preservation of Yiddishkeit permeated every part of their waking lives, this period in 20th century history was most trying for all Jews in Samarkand. True, we possessed compassion and desire to help the less fortunate with food and clothing, but in reality everyone suffered. No one knew what the next day would bring. People were being arrested day and night, some never to return. Even those fortunate enough to be released came home broken and fragile. I could honestly say that not a single family had been spared tribulation.

Refael Chudaidatov was unique in Samarkand. Blessed with a sharp mind, he had a firm grasp of the suffering that blanketed the region. Keenly aware of no destructive force mightier than despondency, he managed to rise above his dismal surroundings and show others how to conduct a life of happiness. More importantly, his exuberance pulled in others like a magnet.

His convictions became all the more impressive for those who got to know him better. Reb Refael suffered from a variety of ailments and had plenty of reasons to complain. Yet, rather than view his body as weak and afflicted, he strove to make

every limb and muscle a conduit for the dissemination of joy and Yiddishkeit.

Direct and unflappable, Reb Refael had a good word for every situation. When, during World War Two, thousands of refugees began pouring into Samarkand, he was one of those whose kindness literally saved lives.

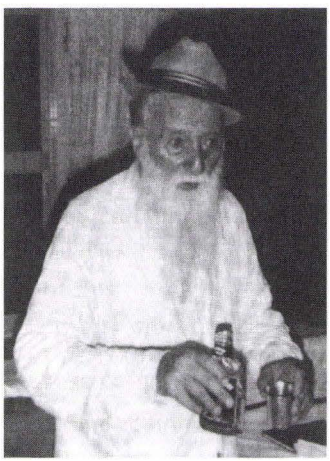
One egregious incident involved a group of non-Chabad yeshiva students. Products of the Lithuanian method of study, with limited exposure to the ideas of Chassidus, they were now among the refugees. Someone found them a room to sleep in; there they huddled all day, wallowing in self-pity. They had no food, no inkling about the fate of their families; their clothing was infested with lice.

One day, their door burst open and Reb Refael walked in, face radiant. He sat himself down on the floor next to the students and in a soft voice asked each one for his name. As soon as he began talking, they began to smile.

"Where is the water?" he asked.

The group stared at each other in confusion. "Over there," said one of them, pointing to a jug.

Reb Refael washed his hand, passed the jug around the room, and washed everyone's hands. He pulled out a loaf of bread and broke off thick chunks, which he distributed around the room.



Reb Refael Chudaidatov

"Are you yeshiva *bochurim*?" he asked. "Yes? Listen, I will tell you what it means to live here, what it means to have self-sacrifice for Torah."

He sat there talking gently to the teenagers, in a mixture of Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian – all with the recognizable lilt Bukharian Jews use in their *davening*. And then, without explanation, he rose and left the room. There

was a sense, when the door shut behind him, that a surge of happiness had departed with him.

Reb Refael continued to visit the despondent, neglected students. They looked forward to it; each time he came, his presence brightened up the room. In this way, he brought a measure of hope back into their lives while others were too busy and burdened to care about them. Such acts personified Reb Refael's special character.

His heart pulsating with the love of fellow Jews, Reb Refael often walked up and down the streets of Samarkand, providing people with clothing, jobs, and simply optimism. He distributed to the refugees the food his wife had prepared for their own family.

"Our children have parents to take care of them," he said, placating his wife. "These people have no one."

In a time when observance of basic Jewish laws was fraught with danger, Reb Refael famously upheld the slightest custom or severest stringency. On Pesach, for example, many of the more devout Jews eat matzah made from wheat that was guarded against moisture from the time of harvest, instead of matzah simply guarded from the time of grinding the wheat into flour. To be sure, under extenuating circumstances, extra-guarded wheat that is not available can be substituted by "regular" flour. But Reb Rafael would not entertain such a thought. Instead, every year before Pesach, he led a group for an hours' long journey to the wheat fields, where they cut wheat they would guard against moisture, and later grind it into flour for *shmura matza.*

Reb Refael was often seen riding the streets and alleyways of Samarkand on his bicycle, silver beard streaming behind him in the wind. Elderly Chassidim would not travel on a bicycle, which was considered beneath their dignity, but Reb Refael viewed himself as a simple Jew. His trusting nature endeared him not only to his Bukharian brethren but the newly arrived Chassidim. Even when some of the latter eyed him warily, Reb Refael never blamed them. "We live in dangerous times," he often said. "Everyone has the right to be suspicious of everyone."

Commercial Dealings

Also a shrewd businessman, Reb Refael procured a document that allowed him to travel throughout the country for commerce. Utilizing this special status, he was often asked to do favors for people trying to smuggle goods between cities. Always he agreed, no matter how dangerous the requests. He was convinced that G-d would protect him for helping other Jews.

In a remarkable incident, he was once approached by a local Chacham, Sephardic rabbi, with an unusual request.

"My grandfather bequeathed me the family fortune – gold, silver, diamonds, and pearls," the man revealed. "I must get this treasure to my relatives in Bukhara. Can you take it for me?"

Reb Refael immediately agreed. On his next trip, he took along a pouch filled with the treasure, along with boxes and suitcases for others, and accompanied by a youngster he had agreed to chaperone to a different city. As he stood waiting for a train, two policeman suddenly approached him and ordered him to follow them to the police station.

"But here is my permit as an international merchant," he argued, showing his documentation. "I will miss my train."

Ignoring his protestations, the police dragged him off and hit the youngster in the face, causing his nose to gush blood. Reb Refael, taking advantage of the commotion, hurled the pouch onto a passing wagon being driven by two Jews he recognized. This quick action saved him from certain arrest. At the station the police confiscated one of his belongings, then allowed him to catch his train.

Nevertheless, the authorities kept careful watch. They tried to recruit him to the Communist cause and instruct him to persuade other Jews to sell their precious assets to the government in return for the worthless national currency. They jailed the Chassid when he refused to comply. During his incarceration, his wife frequently stopped by with kosher food, and Reb Rafael was able to relay a message through her to a top official who secured his release.

Later, once home, Reb Refael told his wife about a startling dream he had had in jail. "An old man came to tell me that we would have a girl; he said to name her Yeshua – 'salvation.'" Indeed, his wife gave birth to a girl, whom they named Yeshua.

Meanwhile, in line with his obsession to help as many Jews as possible, Reb Refael established an agricultural settlement that employed many Chassidim – a large plot with vineyards and a fruit-drying plant. But trouble was brewing: informers told the authorities that fruit was being left purposefully to rot – cheating the government of revenue. Soon a group of inspectors arrived to decide if this new farmer's economic interests dovetailed with those of the Communists.

Reb Refael was ready for them.

A serious shortage of truck tires had crippled the local economy; Reb Refael, thinking ahead, had traveled to Tashkent and purchased a large amount. When interrogations began about his farm, he shouted at the inspectors, "How can you accuse me of undermining the local economy? You know that no one else did anything at all to alleviate the tire shortage here. I'm the only one who traveled to Tashkent to bring back hundreds of tires – and this is how you treat me?" The inspectors apologized and left him alone.

Reb Refael purchased fruit for low prices in Asia, dried them in his factories, and sold them at tremendous profit in towns and villages throughout Siberia. It would be difficult to pinpoint another individual who did so much to alleviate the plight of fellow Jews in Samarkand. The farm provided employment for dozens of families, enabling them to earn a respectable salary.

After a while, the American Joint Distribution Committee (the "Joint") donated tractors and other heavy farm equipment to the Jewish settlement, but their goodwill spectacularly backfired. The Soviets, incensed at the meddling of this organization, announced the closing of the settlement. Undeterred, Reb Refael used all the buildings on his property to house refugees; without him, hundreds would have slept under the open sky. He accompanied my grandfather, Dzura, from house to house,

encouraging local Jewish residents to provide as much aid as possible.

Mikvah

Lest one think that Reb Refael focused solely on the Samarkand Jewry, I would like to relate his central involvement in the establishment of the local *mikvah.*

After Stalin's death, we felt the laws more eased as far as building up a communal structure – one that automatically drew the attention of the government. One of the most pressing religious needs at the time was the reopening of at least one *mikvah* that had been shuttered. The idea, though noble, created problems with implementation. Everyone was afraid to get involved – except for Reb Refael.

"You need more *emunah,*" he chided us gently. "Hashem will help."

He went to the office in charge of approving construction, and applied for a permit to reopen the *mikvah.* The committee immediately enumerated reasons to deny the request – chiefly that it was unhygienic. Reb Refael, undaunted, pressed the officials until they agreed to inspect the *mikvah,* and he made sure to be present when the committee arrived.

"You see, we are right," the committee members declared to Reb Refael, and pointed to the water. "Look. It's filthy. Disgusting. We must protect the public from contracting diseases in this place."

"The water is perfectly clean!" protested Reb Refael. "You are just looking for reasons to reject my request."

And then, without giving them a chance to react, he drew out a cup, bent down, filled it up with *mikvah* water, recited the blessing *shehakol,* and gulped it down in full view of his aghast audience. Eventually the committee approved the reopening.

Thanks to the deep faith of this special Chassid, the entire Samarkand community would finally have a *mikvah,* but Reb Refael was not satisfied. He approached the head of the city's

cultural committee, and asked for official recognition of the *mikvah.* He was instead directed to Moscow in order to secure a permit.

"No one will dare contradict an order from Moscow," they said. "Besides, why would an officer in Moscow care about Uzbekistan? They will approve it."

Why did the elderly Reb Refael undertake the long and seemingly unnecessary journey to the Russian capital? Because he felt that more Jewish women would use the *mikvah* if they knew it was government-sanctioned. As usual, his personal safety meant little to him.

Once in Moscow, he used his connections to meet with an official who sat on the committee of culture and religion. Lo and behold, he was granted the permit! Document in hand, Reb Refael triumphantly returned to Samarkand and hired a construction crew to beautify the *mikvah.*

Bedlam immediately ensued. Local police tried to halt the construction; journalists ran articles condemning Reb Refael for introducing "antiquated customs" into the city; and local officials began to discredit the Chudaidatov family. Confronting the local authorities, he complained bitterly that his family name was being besmirched – while he truly had procured the necessary authorization of the *mikvah.*

"No one wants to do business with me anymore," he shouted at them. "I got a permit, and you dare do this to me? Do you want me to travel back to Moscow and tell them about this?"

The local officials realized they had overstepped their bounds. When Reb Refael suggested they approve his exit visa, all agreed that this would be a perfect way to placate all sides. Thanks to his efforts in establishing the *mikvah,* Reb Refael merited to leave the Soviet Union and move to Eretz Yisrael.

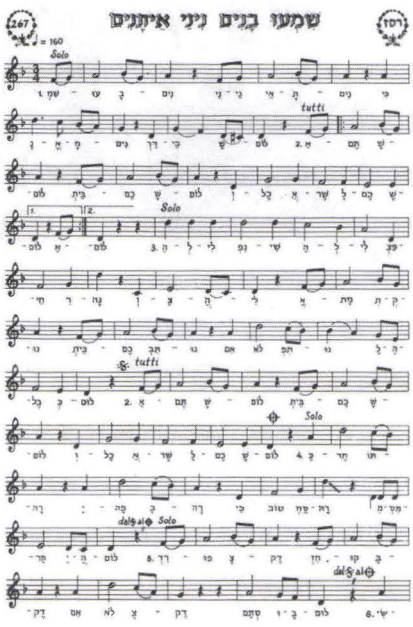
Chabad Melody

In 1972, he joined a group of recent Bukharian emigrants to meet the Lubavitcher Rebbe. During the Purim *farbrengen,* the Rebbe asked them to sing a song. Reb Refael, standing before

thousands of Chassidim, taught them "*Atem Shalom*" – so-called for its oft-repeated chorus. He was ninety-one at the time.

As he stood there, eyes closed, transported back to the bitter hardship of Samarkand, Reb Refael's voice resonated with the sacrifice he and so many others had made to help keep Yiddishkeit alive.

Listen children, descendants of the strong;
Peace is the way of the faithful!
Pursue and maintain justice;
Without justice we are closed and blocked.
East, west, north, south, upper, and lower – all will praise Your Name.
Peace to you, Peace to your home, and to all that belongs to you – Shalom!



Musical notes to Niggun Atem Shalom

Chassidim could sense from his singing that, regardless of the incredible challenges they had faced, Jewish values remained deeply cherished, coupled with an aching desire for more peaceful times.

In a sign of distinction toward this selfless individual, the Rebbe later instructed Reb Refael to sing this melody on other occasions as well, and even adopted "*Atem Shalom*" as a Chabad melody.

Chapter
ELEVEN

UNSUNG HERO

Born in Samarkand in Adar of 5664 (1904), my grandfather's cousin Chananya began learning Torah under a series of teachers. Back then, before Rabbi Eliezrov's arrival, there was no organized schooling. Groups of parents simply convened to select a *melamed,* instructor, for their children. Subject matter was determined by age – first the *alef-beit,* then *Chumash, Mishnayos* and, for the older boys, *Gemara.* Classes were held in a ramshackle building near a local river.

My grandfather's cousin was one of the many who benefited tremendously when Rabbi Eliezrov arrived and overhauled the educational standards. Thanks to his efforts, children and yeshiva students soon enjoyed an efficient school system, starting with the earliest all the way through the advanced classes. Chananya excelled in his studies: at age seventeen he already received ordination as a *shochet,* having passed all the tests with flying colors.

Chananya, like many others, was devastated when Rabbi Eliezrov departed from Samarkand to return to his home in Jerusalem. Finding a worthy replacement would be difficult. Although someone did come for a few months to maintain Rabbi

Eliezrov's work, he was forced to leave by the authorities. Future prospects of Yiddishkeit in the city looked dim.

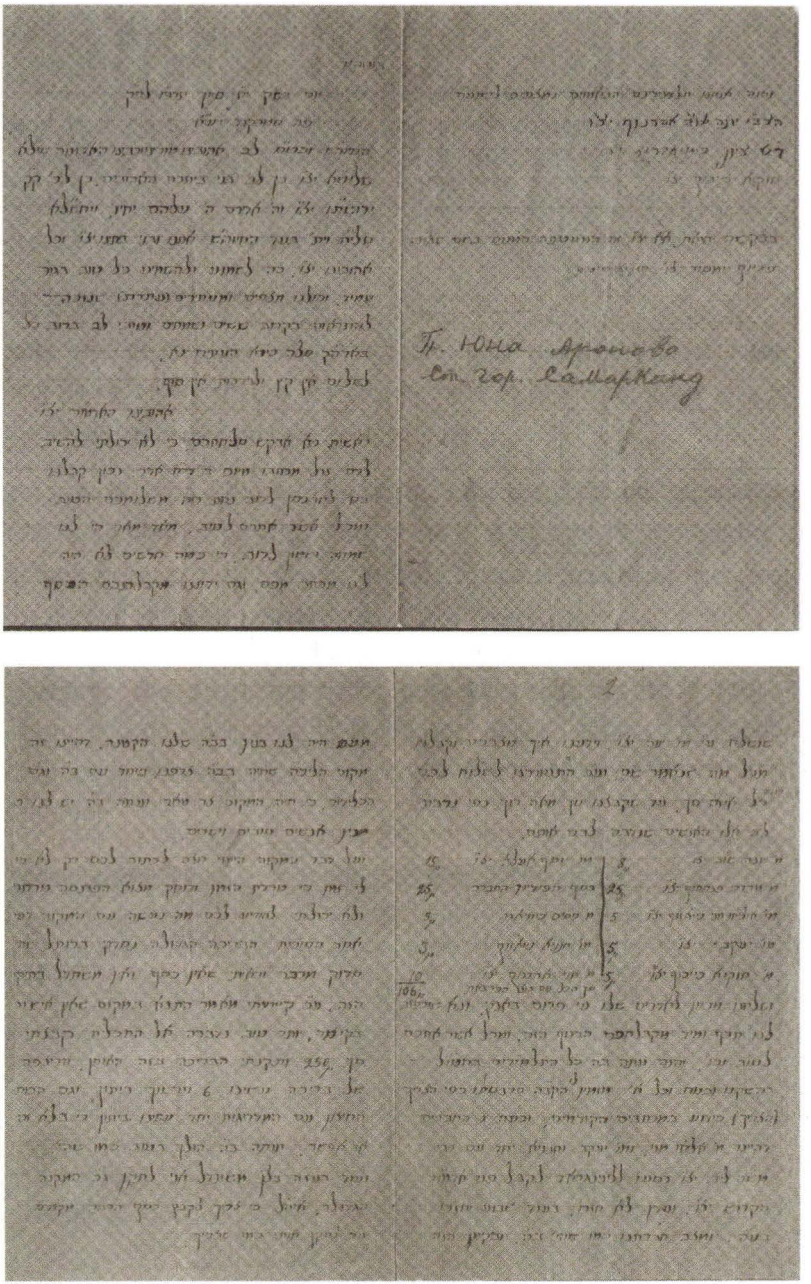
Chananya therefore decided to take matters into his own hands. Despite his youth, he traveled alone to Leningrad, where he met with the Rebbe Rayatz and pleaded to have someone sent as talented and dedicated as Rabbi Eliezrov. The Rebbe nodded, but two years passed without change.

As expected, that time proved difficult for us idealistic young Chassidim, who yearned to study from a scholar we could emulate. True, there were saintly individuals in our community, but none equal to the stature of Rabbi Eliezrov. Therefore, after two years without leadership, Chananya resolved to visit the Rebbe again as part of a delegation comprised of my grandfather Dzura and my great-uncle Yaakov.

This time, their trip was crowned with success. After hearing their request, the Rebbe assigned Simcha Gorodetsky to travel to Samarkand and replace Rabbi Eliezrov. The young Simcha had just celebrated his wedding, but he did not hesitate in the least to undertake this new and dangerous mission. Immediately



Right to left: Reb Simcha Goredetzky, Reb Mendel Futerfas; above him is Reb Berke Schiff. Left to right: Reb Moshe Nisselevitch, Reb Chananya Niyazov; above him is Reb Gavriel Niyazov.



Letter to Rabbi Eliezrov from his students, notifying him of the delegation sent to the Frierdiker (Previous) Rebbe with the request for a shliach to Samarkand.

upon his move, he threw himself body and soul into the revival of local Yiddishkeit. Within a very short time, his skill and selflessness became evident to one and all.

This was back in the day before instant communication, but, even so, the total anarchy created by the Communist Revolution destroyed *any* form of communication. For a while, letters were not being delivered and people were not getting information. So, when Reb Simcha's wife gave birth to a baby girl, her husband did not hear of the birth until he visited the Rebbe again in Leningrad. After giving a detailed report of Jewish life in Samarkand, Reb Simcha requested permission to visit his wife before returning to Samarkand. "Why waste time traveling to your wife in Kremenchug?" replied the Rebbe, perturbed at the situation facing Jews in Samarkand. "Return to Samarkand; your wife will follow you there. After all, she did not bear you a son and you do not need to attend his *bris*..."

Back in those days, telling someone living in the heartland of Russia to move to Samarkand was identical to telling them to move to faraway Australia – but Reb Simcha did not waver. He left immediately for Samarkand and, within a short time, his wife and daughter followed.

Upon his arrival in Samarkand, Reb Simcha was deeply moved to see the genuine, heartfelt love the Bukharian Jews felt towards the Rebbe. Even all these years later, the seeds planted by earlier Chassidim were bearing fruit.

Reb Simcha was thunderstruck by the pure faith and simplicity of the Bukharian Jews. Reuven Akilov was a case in point. Everyone knew Reuven; everyone loved Reuven. He sat for hours every day reciting *tehillim* in shul and, although he understood not a word, Reuven said *tehillim* with the greatest fervor and enthusiasm.

"Do you understand the first line of *tehillim*?" Reb Simcha once asked Reuven. "Do you know what *Ashrei Ha'ish* [Happy is the man] means?"

"Not really."

"*Asher lo halach* [Who does not go]?"

"No."

"*B'atzas Resha'im* [In the counsel of the wicked]?"

"Ah!" Reuven's face lit up in recognition. "A *rasha* is a wicked thing; we need to beat a *rasha*..."

Reb Simcha suddenly remembered an enigmatic statement once said by the Rebbe: "If you meet a simple Jew and you love him nonetheless, this indicates that you are fitting to serve as my emissary."

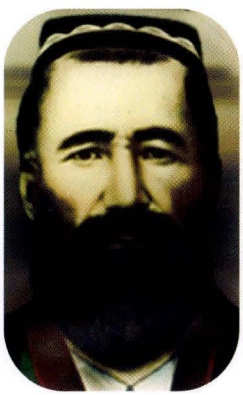
Looking at this simple Jew who barely understood even a single line of the *tehillim* he recited for hours on end, Reb Simcha grasped the meaning of the Rebbe's words.

Reuven *davened* in the minyan of the Chabad Chassidim and made sure to sit with them when they studied *Likkutei Torah.* The Chassidim knowing full well of his ignorance, simply could not comprehend why he insisted on joining them. Once, the *shiur* participants turned to him and said, "Reuven! You don't even understand the Yiddish we are speaking and you certainly can't understand the subject we are learning; why do you keep attending the *shiur*?"

"I will answer you with a parable," he replied. "There was once a gambling den populated by the same group who would sit all night dealing cards. They had a friend who came every night but just sat there and never played. One night the police raided the gambling den and arrested the group, but when they grabbed the bystander, he resisted them, saying, 'I'm just a spectator! I never understood the game in the first place!'

" 'Just come along with us now to the station,' the police answered. 'Once we are there, we will sort everything out and decide if you are part of the group.'

"The same is true with me," concluded Reuven. "After one-hundred-and-twenty years, when this group will arrive in Heaven, I hope that in Heaven they will



Reuven Akilov

drag me along with this group and decide that I, too, deserve to be rewarded for attending the *shiur*, even if I don't understand anything."

The Chassidim truly enjoyed Reuven's perspective.

In Righteous Battle

But times were changing. As the Yevsektzia instigated numerous activities, the Rebbe Rayatz vociferously condemned the atheistic regime and their planned attacks on religion. Already back in 1920, Yevsektzia agents had begun terrorizing the Rebbe Rayatz, and even entered his synagogue with drawn guns.

The Rebbe had already intensified his already superhuman efforts to stoke the embers of Yiddishkeit by strengthening his network of clandestine *chadorim* – mobilizing his Chassidim to teach young children the Hebrew alphabet, as well as the fundamentals of Torah and prayer. At the same time he encouraged his Chassidim to continue in their roles as *mohelim* and *shochtim*. Additionally, he opened new yeshivas, arranged Talmud classes, formed a council to promote Sabbath observance, and founded new *mikvaoth*. Tragically many of his followers met an untimely end, murdered in cold blood for their work.

In 5687 (1927), matters came to a head: the Yevsektzia, no longer able to turn a blind eye, began building a strong list of incriminations against the Rebbe. Not only did he fail to be intimidated, but he publicly condemned his adversaries that Purim, frightening Chassidim (my grandfather among them) with his fervor.

Meanwhile, in retaliation for the assassination of an official, the Soviets initiated a wave of arrests and killings. University students were instructed to devote two hours a day to rifle practice and war drills. Flush with power, the Yevsektzia felt assured of moving at last against the prize target. On 14 Sivan 5687, the Rebbe was arrested and taken to the notorious Spalerka prison.

Jews throughout the world were dumbfounded. No one had believed the Soviets would actually lay a hand on an internationally known figure. Telegrams filled with outrage flooded the

Kremlin from all sides of the globe. Politicians, organizations, media outlets, and activists condemned the Soviets for raising a hand against this revered spiritual leader.

We followed all these events with apprehension. Until then, Jewish communities in the Uzbek cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, Tashkent, and Kokand fared much better than their religious counterparts elsewhere in the Soviet Union. Initially the Yevsektzia had acted less threatening to us. Although it was kept abreast, thanks to informers, of the network of schools run by Rabbi Gorodetsky, as well as the public Torah classes in the synagogue, we were for the most part left alone.

But now the long arm of the Yevsektzia was making itself felt. Samarkand, for example, had once boasted more than thirty synagogues. Now the number had dwindled to one.

As elsewhere, the regime began the process of eradication and forced assimilation. Synagogues were shut down; Torah observance became increasingly difficult. A number of Jewish leaders were arrested, newspapers closed, and the publication of books suppressed. At the same time, the regional Jewish population began to grow: the Soviets had exiled a group of dissidents to Uzbekistan, and large numbers of refugees had fled to Tashkent as well.

One Shabbos, when the police brazenly entered the synagogue and called for an emergency meeting, my grandfather Dzura immediately rose and shouted, "Never! Never will we allow this holy place to become a meeting ground for Communists!"

The police, taken aback, agreed to cancel the meeting on condition that all congregants sign a pledge not to allow anymore Torah classes in the synagogue. Everyone refused. At that point, the Yevsektzia announced the intention to hunt down and jail all those responsible for organizing the renaissance of Torah in Samarkand. We then knew that Rabbi Gorodetsky, among others, were doomed.

Meanwhile, a worldwide storm of outrage continued to build against the Soviet regime, which was pressured to commute the death sentence of the Rebbe Rayatz. He was banished to a

far-flung village for a sentence of three years. This too was commuted following an outcry. Finally, the Rebbe was released on condition that he leave the Soviet Union; shortly afterwards, he moved to Riga, Latvia.

Although ecstatic over the news of the Rebbe's release, Chassidim grieved silently over the forced relocation. A group from Samarkand decided to travel to the Rebbe and see him again before he left this accursed land. After making the necessary arrangements, they were fortunate enough to spend Tishrei with him. Some Niyazov relatives were in this group, as was Rabbi Gorodetsky.

They kept track of the days and hours ticking away, steeling themselves for what would be a most poignant gathering on 24 Tishrei and an uncomfortable finality to his departure. The station was thronged with Chassidim wishing to bid the Rebbe farewell. Some held up their young children, instructing them to gaze at his holy countenance; those trapped inside what would later be called the Iron Curtain knew this was their last opportunity. As the train pulled out, they looked on longingly, tears streaming down their cheeks, and reluctantly dispersed.

Later, while on the train out of Russia, the Rebbe composed a letter to his numerous Chassidim left behind. Among the lines were the loving words:

> *As water reflects a face, my heart is awake and feels the sweetness and power of the essential bond of the entire community of Chassidim to our Tree of Life. Your physical wellbeing, education, conduct, and spiritual direction deeply affect me to the innermost core of my heart.*

Before leaving, the Rebbe Rayatz had charged certain Chassidim with the highly dangerous task of maintaining the entire network of Yeshivas Tomchei Tmimim throughout Russia. This required organizational skills, alacrity and, most importantly, secrecy. My grandfather and his brethren knew they would have to work doubly hard to hold onto the Rebbe's vision and inspiration. This feeling would animate generations of selfless followers.

First Attempt

They returned to Samarkand. When Chananya saw he could not make ends meet as a *shochet* in this anti-religious climate, he began importing silk from Moscow to Bukhara. His business flourished and he used the profits to finance the many local clandestine Torah schools. But as time passed, life became so dangerous that Chananya realized he had to try and escape the Soviet Union for Eretz Yisrael.

He sold his assets, and slipped out of Samarkand one night in the dead of winter with his wife and their young daughter Miriam. They traveled to Kiarki, a small village near the border of Afghanistan. (After a regional war in 1992, Kiarki became part of the Ararat province of Armenia, and renamed Tigranashen after an ancient king.)

After renting a dusty hovel, my grandfather's cousin tried to keep a low profile as he began to search for a trustworthy person to sneak them across the border – a herculean effort. The majority of smugglers took money up front and never delivered. Even worse, some worked for the Communists; after taking the money, they would deliver the group right into the hands of the border guards.

Chananya managed to find a smuggler who seemed more reputable. A significant sum changed hands, and late that night he and his family were led deep into the forest bordering Afghanistan. Imagine their surprise to find acquaintances from Samarkand waiting in the forest as well.

"Stay here and don't make a sound," whispered their guide. "I'm going to bring the horses. It will take a few hours."

The guide disappeared. Patches of moonlight filtered through overhead branches and speckled the faces of the weary travelers. A deathly stillness filled the woods, broken only by the creaking of trees that swayed drunkenly in the wind. A blizzard was coming. The group sat silently on their meager possessions, awaiting in vain the return of their guide.

The sky turned pink, then mauve, light spreading like a stain. The group felt the bitter taste of disappointment.

Suddenly they noticed a figure surrounded by a pack of dogs approaching them, rifle in his arm.

"This is it," Chananya thought. "The guide has alerted the border guards. We're going to be arrested now, perhaps even killed."

When the stranger came closer, the group, noticing his hunting garb, breathed a sigh of relief. The hunter stared at them curiously. Then he disappeared behind the trees with his dogs.

But relief came prematurely. The sky turned gusty and heavy; wet snowflakes began to fall and completely cover the group. They continued standing there woodenly for hours in the dense snow.

Frostbite would have killed many had they not been discovered by a border patrol. The latter confiscated all their belongings, released the women and children, and arrested all the men. When Chananya's wife and daughter returned weeping to the border town, they were refused any place to sleep. After wandering through the icy streets for hours, the pair finally managed to rent a small, filthy room.

To compound matters, Miriam contracted meningitis. Chananya's wife found herself in a most precarious situation – stuck in a primitive village with no doctors or medicine, and very little food. She juggled care for her feverish daughter with frequent trips to the jail to bring Chananya bread and water. She knew her husband would rather starve to death than eat non-kosher food.

Somehow, word of their predicament reached a family member, Sasson Niyazov. He whisked Miriam and her mother back to Samarkand, found them a house, and organized a group of people to care for them. Since many of those crossing the border were accused of monetary fraud and tax evasion, Chananya's wife began to collect signatures attesting that he had no debts. She then took the dangerous step of traveling alone back to the town where her husband was being held. She entered the police station, documents in hand, and demanded her husband's release.

The police sneered. "We are awaiting orders from Moscow. Until then, your husband stays here."

Within a few days, orders arrived from Moscow instructing the police to send every prisoner, under heavy guard, back to the jail in their hometown, where local police would deal with them accordingly. Chananya knew he was in danger, as he was already wanted by the Samarkand police for years. He found reasons to delay this transfer while, back home, his family frantically collected enough funds to bribe his way to freedom. Finally, three months later, in Nissan, Chananya was released. He returned home in time to celebrate Pesach as a free man. The joy of the newly reunited family was indescribable.

The Great Escape

It would seem that, after this ordeal, my grandfather's cousin would settle down in Samarkand and never try to escape again. But Chananya knew they could never live as religious Jews under Soviet rule. Within a few months, his family decided to try again, this time via an alternative route that involved jumping off a moving train near the border with Afghanistan. Such a move usually meant instant death, especially for the children and the elderly, but railroad engineers were often bribed to slow down considerably at the necessary juncture. (Often people first threw out a coat and hat to make it appear that someone was jumping, to see if any guards in the area started to shoot.)

This time they traveled in the summer. Chananya, his wife, his daughter, and group of friends boarded the train with their bags, anxiously awaiting the signal to jump.

After a few hours of traveling, their guides returned with the somber news that a large contingent of soldiers had been spotted patrolling the area. "It is not safe to jump now. Throw out your bags when we give the signal; then disembark at the next station."

Everyone obeyed. At the next station, they milled about until they could board a train traveling in the opposite direction. After disembarking at their original station, they now waited for

a new train to try their luck at jumping again. The next one to steam in was a mail carrier, its cars lacking the most basic necessities. Most were open to the elements, leaving the escapees no choice but to board and hope for the best.

This time, they were able to estimate the length of time for the train to reach the jumping point.

"Get ready!" the guards hissed. "You have two minutes!"

The group gaped in wide-eyed shock. The train was continuing to clatter along at great speed.

"Why isn't the train slowing?" someone cried out.

The guides shrugged. "One minute! Jump, hit the ground, roll yourselves into a ball, and roll along the ground."

Chananya frantically began binding his daughter Miriam to his body with some rope. Others followed suit with their own children. Yaakov Niyazov's wife was heavily pregnant, with no way of protecting her unborn child; nevertheless, she resolved to join the group.

"Now!" someone screamed. "Jump!"

Heaven and earth flashed by in a smudge of green, brown, and blue, as Chananya and his wife leaped. They rolled along the ground for a few seconds until they came to a stop.

Gingerly they began testing their bodies. They were alive with no broken bones! Soon they heard whispers from all around them as the group called to each other and gathered together. Except for some gashes, scrapes, and bruises, no one had suffered serious injury. Even the young children were unscathed. A miracle.

"Quiet!" Their guides materialized from nowhere. "We must hide, it is not safe here."

They were thrust into a grove hidden by rows of trees but, as they sat there under the blazing sun, they realized they could not survive the intense heat without water. The guides had disappeared yet again. A group formed and went to speak with a caravan of Gypsies parked nearby, who were gracious enough to share some water. The children drank first.

Meanwhile, their guides returned and led the group to a

brook of fresh water. "Tonight we cross the border," they said. "We have to cross two deep rivers. We leave at nightfall."

Night found the group waiting with the children strapped to their backs, listening apprehensively to instructions.

"We cannot use regular rafts to cross the wide river," their guides explained. "It would raise the suspicion of the guards in the area. Instead, we have inflatable rafts made out of cowhide. Four or five people can sit in each raft. You will cross slowly with the help of oars."

The group stared at the crude rafts with trepidation. Nevertheless, they had no choice but to comply.

Hardly had they been seated when a whistle sounded nearby.

"Stop!" hissed the guides. "No one move. There are guards patrolling nearby."

After hours of unbearable silence, the group returned to their grove to wait. Later that night, and on the next, their guides pinpointed patrols combing the area for escapees, forcing the group to remain in their hideout.

Finally, on the fourth night, all sixteen members set out to cross the raging river in four cowhide rafts. They exuded fear, people hapless and wary of capture. The water crashed and eddied. The moon moved quickly behind torn clouds. All around them was black.

They paddled furtively, expecting to hear the muffled cries of an overturned craft at any moment. Hearts pounding, the group prayed as they neared a vortex of water – would they capsize and drown? However, the rafts skirted around the whirlpool and deposited them roughly onto the opposite bank.

The group threw themselves down, gasping with exhaustion. The guides expertly deflated and folded the rafts, then strapped the sopping material onto their backs.

"Get up, get up," they snapped. "There's no time to waste. We must cross the second river tonight and get into Afghanistan. Run!"

The guides sped across an expanse of land separating the two rivers, the group trying to keep up. Chananya realized that

the pregnant wife of Reb Yaakov, nearly doubled over in agony and exhaustion, was urging her children to run. In a flash, he passed Miriam over to his wife and clutched Reb Yaakov's children as the group raced toward their next obstacle.

The next river appeared even more ominous than the first. The water growled sullenly as it rushed by, creating dangerous currents.

"We can't inflate the rafts just yet," a guide whispered. "The water is too low at this point; rocks will punctuate the rafts and render them unusable.

"Instead, everyone will wade into the water. When the water reaches above your waists, inflate and board the rafts."

In crushing anxiety, Chananya and the group stared across the rushing current and sensed that even the guides despaired of all of them reaching safety. Nevertheless, they treaded through the flowing river; they unfolded the rafts and inflated them when the waters became too deep. The viscous mud clinging to their feet made climbing into the rafts difficult, but eventually everyone seated themselves and rowed following the instructions of their guides who showed them how to navigate the tricky waters.

One of the rafts began to fall apart in a particularly rough section of the river. Everyone else, scattered in individual rafts, watched in dismay. However, one of the women on the raft reached into her pocket, pulled out an *akifoman* piece she had safeguarded from the Pesach Seder as a *segulah*, good-luck charm, and tossed it into the river. Miraculously the waters subsided, and the raft crossed to safety.

The group jumped off the rafts, ran through the ankle-deep water to the shore, and stared at each other in amazement. As if by prearranged signal, they turned their eyes heavenward and offered a silent prayer of gratitude to Hashem for allowing them to escape the Communist regime – and a life of constant anticipation, constant watching. They embraced one another and broke out in dance, much to the amusement of their guides.

Full Circle

To avoid the pitfalls suffered by earlier groups, Bukharian Jews sometimes did not pay the guides until the latter returned with written proof that the escapees had reached their destination – which involved a more exorbitant fee. Chananya, having already suffered at the hands of unscrupulous guides, preferred to pay more for this arrangement. The guides now removed their documents for the group to sign and agreed to return to Samarkand to get full payment from Sasson Niyazov.

Everyone signed immediately.

"Peace unto you," the guides chanted the Muslim blessing. "Continue walking and you will meet the Afghan border guards. They will treat you well." The guides then spun around and began rowing back across the river.

The group walked until they reached a group of Afghani police.

"We seek asylum from Russian aggression," Chananya announced. "We seek protection in Afghanistan."

The police treated the group well. "It is best to hire donkeys for the women and children," they suggested. "The border crossing station is some distance away."

The group was already low on money. Therefore, after quick discussion, they decided to continue on foot in the broiling heat. The guards gave them directions and the group began walking.

As they approached the border, a group of swarthy police dressed in traditional garb accosted them.

"Miserable Jews," the police spat. "The Jews in Palestine are killing our Muslim brothers. We should kill you as well."

Chananya and the group trudged forward in stony silence. Fortunately the police were content with threats alone. Arriving at the station, the group felt gratified to find other families from Samarkand waiting there, who had escaped via alternate routes.

Heavy silence filled the office. The border guards scrutinized every piece of documentation, checking for forgeries or

inconsistencies. The silence was punctuated only by the sound of multiple stamps slapped onto their documents.

"You *must* rent camels for the next leg of your journey," said an officer. "There is no way you can walk the distance, especially in the heat."

The group gazed across the vast, high plateaus. The horizon was immense. The poor, sandy soil added to their desolation, and they realized that the officer was right. Despite their meager funds, there was no way they could continue on foot.

"Agreed," sighed Chananya. "Please help us hire a guide."

Soon an Arab arrived, leading a caravan of four camels. "It will take a week for traveling," he said. "I know all the shaded rest areas on the way and where to find water." The group agreed to his fee, promising to pay him when they reached their destination.

That week became, most possibly, the worst of their entire lives. The ride under the blazing sun was horrendous. True to his word, the guide knew every spot of shade along the way and found multiple oases. Although the water partially relieved them, there was still further to go, and they continued plodding, battling against the desert heat and their unquenchable thirst. Many people in the group began vomiting, sometimes bringing up blood. Others fainted. Every day the group rode on for hours, soaked in sweat, with children screaming and women crying.

Finally, after a week, the group arrived at their first stop. Drained of strength from the long travel in extreme heat, Chananya and the group were touched when Jewish citizens came out to greet them, inviting them to their homes to recuperate. Their hosts not only provided food, drink, and lodgings, they even hired a doctor to care for the women and children suffering from dehydration and other ailments. After a few days, rested and recharged, Chananya and his fellow travelers were ready to proceed.

A telegram was sent to Rabbi Eliezrov, their former teacher and mentor, informing them of their impending arrival and

asking for his help in admitting them into the Holy Land. By now, the group numbered eighteen.

For over a year Chananya and his group continued traveling. Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon – each country had its share of travails and mishaps, and times of camaraderie when they were hosted by local Jewish communities. Each country brought them closer to their destination. Word arrived that Rabbi Eliezrov had come through for them: the documentation they needed for passage to Eretz Yisrael awaited them at the border.

Grateful and exhausted, they reached the city of Jerusalem two days before Pesach 5695 (1935). Words failed them as they entered the land of their aspirations, the city of their dreams.

One of the first people they met was none other than Rabbi Eliezrov, their revered teacher from Samarkand. At last, they had come full circle.

Chapter
TWELVE

CRYPTIC INSTRUCTION

It was in 5687 (1927) when the Rebbe Rayatz summoned Simcha Gorodetsky and charged him with the mission of continuing the crucial work of Rabbi Eliezrov.

"Although the spiritual and material conditions of the Jews of Bukhara have declined dramatically," said the Rebbe, "their simple, essential faith in Hashem has remained intact. I am committed to paying your salary for the first few months; afterwards, you will find ways to support yourself and your activities."

The Rebbe continued speaking in this manner for some time, giving Rabbi Gorodetsky detailed instructions.

Although still a young man – he had just celebrated a wedding – Rabbi Gorodetsky listened carefully. He and his new wife traveled to Samarkand, where Rabbi Gorodetsky threw himself into improving the Rebbe's hidden network of yeshivas and the communal standards of Yiddishkeit. He made astounding progress: Yeshivas Achei Tmimim swelled to over one thousand students, staffed by twenty-four scholars. The more it grew, the more the Soviets watched its progress.

One day, the president of the local Jewish community paid Rabbi Gorodetsky a visit. This individual, whose relatives wielded

great power, notified the Chassid in no uncertain terms that the Soviets were planning his arrest.

"Flee at once," he said. "Every day counts."

Rabbi Gorodetsky had already been similarly warned by others. "There is no way I can leave," he retorted. "Everything I have worked on so diligently to build will collapse."

"It will collapse when you are arrested as well. Don't be a fool. Leave while you still have a chance."

Rabbi Gorodetsky shook his head. "I cannot take such a step. Hashem is in charge; I trust in Him."

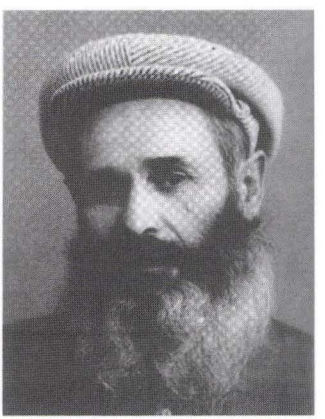
Within a day or two, the young rabbi received a summons to appear before the GPU – as did all twenty-four teachers in his yeshiva. He met with each of his staff individually, coaching them what to say and asking them to conceal the true number of students at Achei Tmimim.

"Minimize our successes," he begged. "Also, be sure to minimize my involvement with the school. Best if you can say that I am no longer involved in any administrative position."

Thanks to this careful preplanning, the questioning session went smoothly. When it was Rabbi Gorodetsky's turn, he claimed complete innocence and denied all charges.

"I know who is informing against me," he declared. "There's a certain individual who has a vendetta against me for not eating meat in his home. He took great offense and vowed to take revenge."

The officials knew exactly what Rabbi Gorodetsky meant. In fact, the entire Jewish community was aware of the incident. The father of a wealthy figure had been involved in a major car accident and lain comatose in a hospital bed. His son had approached Rabbi Gorodetsky in tears, telling him that the doctors suggested risky cranial surgery.



Rabbi Simcha Gorodetsky

"Travel to the Rebbe Rayatz," Rabbi Gorodetsky advised. "Ask him for a blessing."

The Rebbe directed the son to a famous herbalist. At first, the son protested, "I came here for a blessing, not for advice!" But in the end, he met with the herbalist. Within two weeks of treatment, the father was back in Samarkand in full health. His jubilant son threw a lavish thanksgiving meal for all the prominent members of the community; together with his father he expressed his admiration for the Rebbe's supernatural powers.

Sometime during the feast, father and son realized that none other than Rabbi Gorodetsky was absent. And they understood: Rabbi Gorodetsky did not trust their level of *kashruth*. Ironically, having just lauded the Rebbe and his disciples to the crowd, the insulted father and son now became bitter enemies of Rabbi Gorodetsky, convinced he had publicly humiliated them.

After the interrogators heard Rabbi Gorodetsky's rationale, the atmosphere in the room changed. More relaxed, they said, "We will look into that. You can leave now."

Exhilarated, Rabbi Gorodetsky departed with the hope that his fellow *talmidim* could continue their work in strengthening Torah observance of Bukharian Jews while educating the young on their traditions.

Coded Letters

The respite he had hoped for did not materialize. On exactly the same day of the Rebbe Rayatz's arrest in Leningrad, GPU agents knocked on the door of Rabbi Gorodetsky's home. In those darkest years, a knock usually meant an arrest. The regional GPU offices were located in Samarkand, and the policemen standing at his doorstep were authorized to throw the rabbi into jail.

They had no idea that they had just interrupted Rabbi Gorodetsky in the middle of reading a letter from the Rebbe about the finances of the underground yeshivoth! (The Rebbe took utmost care within these letters, which were heavily coded. The

letters themselves arrived glued between the pages of a book.) Quickly Rabbi Gorodetsky hid the letter, answered the door, and began conversing with the officers as his mind raced for a way to escape.

The officers held a folder, on the cover of which was a note written in Russian: *Simcha Gorodetsky – Organizer of Religious Schools.* Glancing at the folder, the young man took advantage of the Uzbeks' faulty command of the language.

"You made an embarrassing error," he said confidently. "My name is not Bagoslawski."

Bagoslawski is Russian for "religious," but of this the Uzbek officers were ignorant. "The address is correct," they insisted.

"It can't be," Rabbi Gorodetsky retorted. "I can assure you that just as the name is wrong, the address is wrong as well."

The officers stared at each other in confusion. "We need to return to headquarters to sort this out. We will be back soon; wait for us here."

Rabbi Gorodetsky had no intention of waiting. The minute they walked away, he rushed inside and frantically destroyed every incriminating letter and document.

"I must escape," he whispered to his wife. "I have no idea where to go, but I must leave."

He slipped out the back window and ran for his life – just in time. The officers returned to arrest him, having been roundly criticized by their superiors for falling for such a trick. They raised a great uproar when they realized that the Chassid had slipped away, but it was too late.

In desperation, Rabbi Gorodetsky ran to Mendel Charashuchin, who hid him in a delivery wagon covered with a large canvas and drove his horse all through the night. Reb Mendel owned extensive orchards and vineyards; he hid the rabbi in his wine cellar for over two months. As Rabbi Gorodetsky crouched there in hiding, he heard about the arrest and subsequent release of the Rebbe, and he decided to risk a visit to the Rebbe in Malachovka, near Moscow.

Jubilant at the sight of his devoted Chassid, the Rebbe exclaimed, "Simcha is your name. If so, may there be *simcha,* happiness, here and there."

Having just escaped its clutches, Rabbi Gorodetsky felt ill at ease about raising the ire of the GPU by being seen in the Rebbe's vicinity. He quickly left and hid, awaiting further instructions. Ten days later, he received a letter from the Rebbe with the instructions: *Return to Samarkand!*

"Move from the Old City to the New," wrote the Rebbe. "Continue your previous work and may Hashem guard you."

True to the Rebbe's instructions, Rabbi Gorodetsky rented an apartment in the New City and began manufacturing socks, while continuing in secret his outreach and educational work. Barely three weeks passed when the dreaded summons arrived, ordering him to appear before the police.

A trio consisting of two Gentiles and one Jew read out his "crimes":

"You are charged with escaping officers authorized to arrest you. Secondly, you are charged with returning – obviously to finish up some counter-revolutionary activity."

After a battery of questions, the two Gentiles left and Rabbi Gorodetsky remained seated across the Jewish officer.

The latter sneered. "You really think we don't know you went to see your Rebbe? Listen to me: We know everything about you!"

"What do you want from me?" the rabbi asked. "I did nothing wrong."

Ignoring the outburst, the officer continued, "You think we don't know that you sent ten young men to study at the yeshiva in Nevel? Can't you see we know everything?"

To substantiate his claim, he read off the names of all ten boys who had gone to learn in Nevel. He flung down the list and returned his attention to a stack of forms on his desk.

Sensing his predicament, Rabbi Gorodetsky hit upon a new tactic.

"I can't take the surveillance anymore," he said softly. "All this secrecy, all this watching, is getting to me. I will forsake my former ways and repent of my deeds. You won't have anymore trouble from me."

The Jewish interrogator shook his head cynically. "You think I believe you? You should sit out the long prison sentence, but . . ."

He paused in midsentence, indecision crossing his face. "What do I gain by sending off an old Jew to prison? Listen: don't stay in the Old City. Move to the New City."

"But I live in the New City already!"

The officer was startled. "I didn't know that," he stammered. "If you sign that you will move and keep a distance from your friends in the Old City, I will free you."

Here the officer tensely paused and glanced around. "There's one condition: You must never repeat a word of what I just said!"

After giving a solemn vow, Rabbi Gorodetsky was freed. Resuming his outreach and educational work in the New City, he was finally able to appreciate the cryptic meaning of the Rebbe's words.

Means of Livelihood

Rabbi Gorodetsky continued searching ways to earn a living without the desecration of the Sabbath. At the time, Reb Refael Chudaidatov, owner of many vineyards, had subverted the Soviet nationalization of all private lands by converting his into farming communities, or kolkhozes. He approached Rabbi Gorodetsky with a plan and solicited his help in setting up the farm before inspection. So successful was their initiative that the Soviets, impressed with their production quotas, left all the property in their hands!

Thanks to their yield of grapes and flowers, many families prospered while observing Shabbos to the fullest. They were even offered additional lands by the authorities to widen the kolkhoz – enormous tracts originally owned by exiled or

imprisoned offenders who were in no position to reclaim them. Now they lay fallow. Rabbi Gorodetsky and Reb Refael took ownership, broadening their activities tenfold.

Rabbi Gorodetsky worked as an agronomist, using plants for food, fuel, fiber, and land reclamation. He learned this science from a drunken Czech farmer who had been exiled to the region. The farmer appreciated the kolkhoz-produced wine with which Rabbi Gorodetsky paid his "tuition" by selling to him. To further his expertise, Rabbi Gorodetsky even traveled to Moscow and took the licensing exam.

These actions further confounded the authorities. They had been convinced that this Chassid had abandoned his religious activities in favor of business – until they were notified that the Jewish farmers were keeping the Sabbath. Infuriated, they once again summoned Rabbi Gorodetsky and forbade him to work among Jews. He now had to move to a different kolkhoz.

Unknown Messenger

At this point, Rabbi Gorodetsky decided to follow in the footsteps of so many Bukharian Jews who had escaped to Eretz Yisrael via Iran. As the train neared the border, the steep incline forced the train to slow down, at which point passengers would jump and make their way to the closest city. Even were they caught, at the very worst their possessions would be confiscated and they would be sent on their way.

Rabbi Gorodetsky boarded the train and waited for its approach at the border. Glancing around apprehensively, seeing he was alone, he flexed his muscles to pull open the door and jump.

At the last second, someone approached him and pinned his arms to his side. "What do you think you're doing? Are you crazy? Get back inside!"

Rabbi Gorodetsky was shocked. The railcar had been absolutely empty! Where had this person come from?

He continued to the last stop, boarded the next train back home, and tried again the next day.

This time, as the train clattered along the rails, he met the guide who was meant to have led him to safety after jumping off the train.

"Where were you yesterday?" the guide demanded. "I was able to bring everyone else across the border, but I couldn't find you anywhere. The train will start slowing down soon; make sure to jump at the correct place."

No sooner had he left, when a soldier approached Rabbi Gorodetsky furtively. "Watch out!" he whispered. "That man is an informer. Don't believe a word he says. Get off at the next station and catch the first train away from here."

Rabbi Gorodetsky almost fainted. At the next station, he fled. He later found that, indeed, all those who had been in that earlier group had gotten caught before the border, thanks to the treachery of the informer. If not for the nameless stranger, Rabbi Gorodetsky would have been in serious trouble: unlike other escapees, he was a veteran criminal, a repeat offender who would have had to pay dearly for trying to escape the Motherland. He never made this attempt again.

To Jail and Back

In 5695 (1935), the Soviets decided to take action and close all the illegal escape routes. They arrested a group of smugglers but, when some of them implicated Rabbi Gorodetsky, he was once again hauled to jail and pressed for names of accomplices. They tossed him into a stifling cell, where he sat in solitary confinement for over a month. Interrogations filled his nights. He grew weaker by the day; the allotment of prison bread was not distributed regularly.

Rabbi Gorodetsky was tortured and beaten, but the authorities failed to extract a confession, or even a single name. Since he had never confessed, and there was no incriminating evidence, he should have been set free. But not in Russia. He was sentenced to three years' imprisonment, which was later lengthened to eight.

After a half year of intimidation and interrogation, Rabbi Gorodetsky was transferred to NKVD headquarters in Tashkent. An informer was planted in his cell, and Rabbi Gorodetsky's wife in a nearby cell so he could hear her sobbing at night.

But nothing fazed this Chassid. He fasted all of Pesach – telling the authorities that he was on a hunger strike to protest his wife's arrest. After Pesach, a physician had to be summoned to treat the rabbi's shrunken innards.

As was done with my relatives and dozens of other Chassidim, Rabbi Gorodetsky was offered recruitment as a government spy. One day, the warden, expressing his admiration of Rabbi Gorodetsky's agronomic skills, arranged to have him transferred to an easier cell. Within a few days, the Chassid was given a relatively light job – heating water for the prisoners – and allowed to study Torah and pray undisturbed.



Some of Reb Simcha's talmidim who came to learn in 770.
Right to left: Bechor Yizhchakov, Tzion Gavrielov, Nechamia Ladayov,
Emmanuel Ladayev, Shimon Fayzakov, Aaron Sayidov



Yeshivat Bukharim in Rishon L'Tzion

After a few days, a different officer met with him and said, "You see how we are awarding you special treatment here. You lack nothing. Why not help us? We will place you in a cell with other prisoners so you can pry information out of them for us. We will trust you."

Rabbi Gorodetsky promptly dismissed the idea. "I will never secure admissions from prisoners who haven't confessed to any wrongdoing."

"If so," threatened the officer, "I will transfer you back to your old cell and cancel all your rights."

"I still can't do it," the rabbi insisted.

The interrogations resumed. The next few months passed in a blur of threats, starvation, and midnight sessions. He was tortured in cruel and unusual ways – drugged cigarettes that brought on fainting spells, solitary confinement with hordes of insects and rodents. Nothing worked. All Rabbi Gorodetsky was willing to admit was to having *read* the accusations against him, but nothing else.

Finally he was tried and sentenced to hard labor in one of the many gulags in the Arctic Circle. It was only after Stalin's

death, years later, that he was granted a reduced sentence and released, emaciated and prematurely aged. A dismal scene greeted him: shortly after his arrest, his wife had suffered a massive stroke, leaving her frail and paralyzed.

In a stunning display of conviction, one of Rabbi Gorodetsky's first acts upon his return to Tashkent was the designing of a *mikvah* that could be built in a cellar undetected. This raised our level of respect for him to even higher levels. Here he was, home from years of torture and deprivation, yet determined to continue the advancement of Yiddishkeit – as though nothing had changed.

Rabbi Gorodetsky went even further than building a *mikvah.* In order to allay the fears of women wanting to immerse, he guided them via back alleys and convoluted paths to the *mikvah,* so that they themselves did not even know its exact address.



Reb Simcha Gorodetsky (top left) at Yeshivat Bukharim in Kfar Chabad

Thanks to his efforts, many couples were able to adhere to the Laws of Family Purity.

Rabbi Gorodetsky knew, however, that he could no longer live in this accursed land, and he applied for a visa. A short while later, he was summoned to the immigration office and informed of the outstanding fees he still owed to the government for approval of the visa. He raised the necessary sum and began preparing for his lifelong dream of reaching Eretz Yisrael, hoping before his departure to persuade as many as possible to strengthen their observance of Torah and mitzvoth.

It was not to be. In an unusual move that spoke volumes about his influence, the secret police posted an agent in Rabbi Gorodetsky's home! This was more than enough to keep people away.

An armed guard accompanied him to the airport and onto the plane. On Purim, the Gorodetsky family landed in Eretz Yisrael.

Chapter
THIRTEEN

DIVINE ORCHESTRATION

Once, while walking the streets of Tashkent, I met a Jew by the name of Nachman Ruzman. We soon became fast friends. The more we spoke, the more I learned of his adventurous life. Nachman had never benefited from a religious upbringing, but he had experienced such revealed Divine intervention that he began to research his heritage. Eventually he found his roots and became a full-fledged *ba'al teshuva.*

Nachman even ran a matzah bakery in Tashkent. One particular year I purchased matzah for Jews in Samarkand who could not obtain them anywhere else. (This is a roller-coaster story I will tell later.) He often regaled his customers with his stories – especially during his stint in the Russian army during World War Two.

He described a particularly brutal battle between his unit and the Germans, which left heavy casualties on both sides. The Soviets rushed more troops into a bloody melee that continued after dark – but it became apparent that the Germans were gaining the upper hand. At one point, Russian generals gave the command to retreat; all the soldiers left everything behind and ran for their lives.

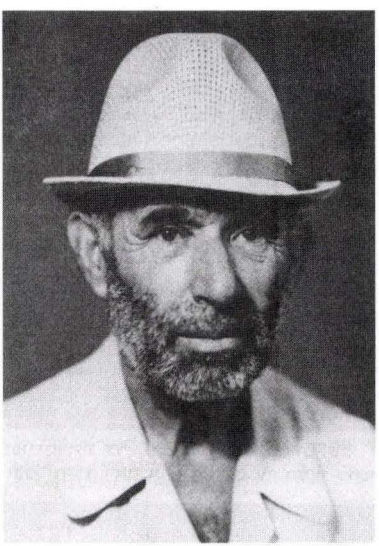
All, except for Reb Nachman and a band of hardy individuals who decided to save the war horses. They skittered around in the dark, under heavy fire, collecting all the animals before making their escape. Reb Nachman supervised the entire operation. So impressed were the generals that he was immediately raised to the rank of major.

"I found this strength in a rush of hate against the Germans," Reb Nachman added. "They killed my wife and daughter. I could not stomach the fact that these accursed killers would capture our magnificent horses; I acted out of vengeance."

His new rank brought with it new responsibilities, and Reb Nachman took charge of feeding his entire battalion. One day, Marshal Georgy Zhukov came to inspect the troops. Zhukov, known as "the man who did not lose a battle," had seen the cost in human lives due to outmoded combat, and he developed new, more effective methods, such as armored vehicles. It was Zhukov who saved Moscow from the Germans. He expertly destroyed their army at Stalingrad, the turning point in the war, and eventually led the Soviet attack on Berlin. He later became Chief of General Staff, Deputy Commander-in-Chief, and Minister of Defense.

Nachman decided to honor the famous officer by arranging a special delicacy – roast fowl. This turned out to be a mistake of epic proportions. The marshal glanced at his plate, and his face turned purple with rage. He then hurled the dish at the waiter.

"I eat like a simple soldier," he roared. "Bring me simple food, whatever everyone else is eating."



Reb Nachman Ruzman

Sensitive soul that he was, Nachman later used this incident as a lesson in how to serve Hashem. Just as he thought he "knew" better how to please the general and fell short, so too, we tend to rationalize that we can orchestrate matters ourselves – failing to realize that Hashem wants us to serve Him with simplicity and pureness of heart.

After a short stint in his new position, Nachman received the grim news that the army had decided to demote many officers and consolidate their tasks. Provision of food had given Nachman much independence and security, which he certainly did not want to lose as he became a lowly soldier again.

Suddenly an idea flashed through his mind – he would get a cat to control the rodent infestation in the army depot under his jurisdiction. Shortly afterwards, an inspector turned up for a surprise evaluation.

"This, I have never seen," he said, peering at the cat. "Whose idea was it?"

"Mine," replied Nachman. "Our soldiers will not have to worry about mice invading their food."

"So simple," mused the inspector, "yet no one else in the army has thought of it."

He turned to the Jew. "Your dedication is remarkable. I will recommend that you stay on in this position."

Life Interrupted

Nachman served in the army until the end of World War Two. After his discharge in 5707 (1947), he was awarded free travel throughout Europe. He sorely needed this diversion: after the murder of his wife and daughter in Lvov by the Nazis, there was little reason for him to return home. Instead, he traveled extensively, taking note of which household items were plentiful in one area and scarce in another – and began selling these items. He made a small fortune.

Nevertheless, Reb Nachman craved stability. He remarried, settled down, and began importing fruits and vegetables – a

business that quickly became lucrative. Everything seemed to be going smoothly when two incidents occurred in quick succession, altering the course of his life.

During his stint in the army, Reb Nachman had become friendly with a certain general with whom he maintained contact for years later. One night, the general came to Reb Nachman's home with a stunning revelation.

"You know I can fly a plane," he said. "I actually own one and I have a proposition for you."

The general lowered his voice conspiratorially, and shot glances at the locked windows. "I'm going to leave this country. Come with me. I plan to fly over the border – to freedom."

Reb Nachman felt conflicted. The lure of fleeing the accursed Soviets was undeniable, but he had just achieved financial stability. Besides, who knew if the general would succeed in his escape or end up being arrested? Once again, Reb Nachman felt the Divine orchestration; he could not bring himself to take the risk.

Insulted, the general stormed out, vowing to take revenge on the ungrateful Jew. Several weeks later, as he attempted to maneuver his aircraft over the border, he was forced down by patrols and brought in for questioning. Seeing his chance to get even, he told the police that the Jew had been complicit.

Meanwhile, back in Tashkent, someone could not stand seeing a wealthy Jew. The police raided Nachman's home, arresting him for illegal speculation and black marketeering. He was tossed into jail and tried – just as word of his supposed complicity in the general's escape reached the courts. Nachman was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment for his business schemes, and an additional fifteen years for abetting an escape. While twenty-five years of prison for an army veteran might seem exorbitant to a foreigner, this was typical for Russia.

Nachman's life started to unravel. He lost all his assets and, after the first two years of his sentence, his wife demanded a divorce so she could remarry and raise their infant son with another man. Then he was sent to Siberia.

When Nachman entered the labor camp, all activity halted. This was the first time the prisoners had ever seen a Jew. A group of gangsters hurled obscenities at him, promising to finish off where Hitler had failed.

Nachman took their threats seriously. That night, as he lay in the barracks, staring through the window at the frosty, forbidding landscape, he felt the first stirrings of *teshuva,* return, and began to contemplate his religion and the Creator.

"My life is over," he thought. "Tonight they will murder me. It is time to repent."

Trembling, Nachman jumped at the slightest noise. Every creak, every cough, was magnified into the loudest proportions, signs of his impending death.

"This is it!" he thought repeatedly. "Now they are coming for me."

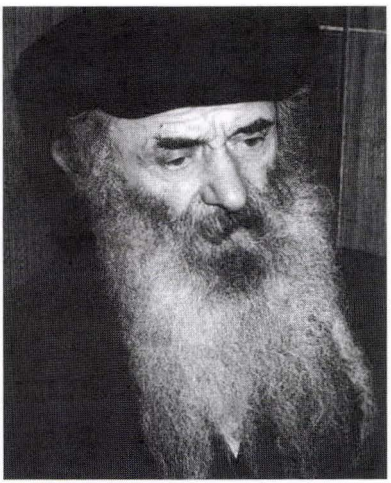
When a loud, crashing noise erupted from a nearby compound, Nachman almost fainted. He fell to the floor and rolled under a bed, waiting to be dragged out and killed – but nothing happened. After a while, he cautiously made his way to the window to see the source of the commotion.

A contingent of soldiers had arrived. They were beating the very prisoners who had threatened him, shouting as they dragged the motley group out of their beds and onto waiting trucks. Within a short time, the trucks rumbled out of the camp, and all fell silent again.

Nachman remained glued to the window in disbelief. It happened! He had prayed, and Hashem had listened!

He felt an overwhelming urge to dance and sing, to hug Hashem (in his words) for this incredible rescue. Unfortunately, lacking religious education, he did not yet know how to harness those feelings into practical application of Torah and mitzvoth.

The next miracle occurred a few days later. Orders arrived from Moscow, transferring Nachman to a far off, different work camp in a warmer climate. Working conditions there were less severe. Better yet, he met Asher Sassonkin, a revered Chassid who won Nachman over with his kindheartedness, religious discussions, and captivating stories.



Reb Asher Sassonkin

During their many years in prison together, Reb Asher taught Nachman about Yiddishkeit, helping him become a complete *ba'al teshuva*. This legendary Chassid, who kept Yiddishkeit alive in the darkest years of Communist repression, managed to awaken Nachman's memories of his heritage. With Reb Asher's encouragement, he began to keep kosher, avoid work on Shabbos, and find a few moments of prayer. In their environment, such actions often resulted in beating, penalties, and daily jeopardy.

Spirit of Resistance

Hearing about a "wonderful Jewish festival" called Sukkot, Nachman decided to build a sukkah right there in the gulag. He spent weeks collecting all sorts of scraps, and finally accumulated enough wood and foliage to assemble a plain hut that sat squarely, in a Siberian gulag, in full public view!

When a group of officers passed by, they called Nachman over and demanded an explanation.

"There is not enough ventilation in the barracks," Nachman replied softly. "I thought it would be nice to build an outdoor extension for people who want some air."

The officers, not figuring Nachman to be Torah-observant, suspected nothing. "Well done," said one, clapping him on the back. "It's nice to see *someone* take initiative in this place to try and improve living conditions."

One winter, as Chanukah approached, Reb Asher revealed his plan to celebrate the festival.

"I'll get ahold of a small, empty food can," he told Nachman. "Let's both save half of our daily ration of margarine over the next two weeks, for oil. We can make wicks from the loose threads at the edges of our coats. When everyone is asleep, we will light our 'menorah' under my bunk."

"Is that the way to celebrate the Festival of Miracles?" Nachman protested. "A rusty can? Margarine? We need a proper menorah, real oil, and the proper place."

He whispered, "I have a few rubles hidden away. Let me pay a friend at the metalworking shed to fashion us a menorah. I also have a few 'debts' to claim at the kitchen."

Several days before Chanukah, Nachman triumphantly displayed to Reb Asher the menorah. He had procured a crude design with eight cups in a row and a raised cup in the middle. On the first night of Chanukah, they set the menorah down in the doorway between the main room of their barracks and the small storage area at its rear. Together the two Jews recited the blessings and kindled the first light, as so many of their brethren were doing in homes around the globe.

The lighting went off without a hitch. As a rule, prisoners did not inform on each other – especially in this case, when they heard Reb Asher explain the significance of the festival.

"You are celebrating the spirit of resistance!" they exclaimed. "The Jews were right to resist the Greek oppressors; we too need to resist our government!"

The second, third and fourth nights of the festival passed in relative quiet. But then, on the fifth, just as Reb Asher and Nachman lit the flames, a sudden hush fell over the room. All eyes turned to the doorway, where an officer just entered. Surprise inspections were common; punishments were routinely meted out for such offenses as a hidden cigarette or hoarded crust of bread.

"Quickly!" hissed a prisoner to Nachman. "Throw it out the window and into the snow."

It was too late. The officer was already striding toward the back doorway, to the Jews huddled over the flames of their menorah.

For a long time the officer gazed at the five flickering flames. Then he turned to Reb Asher.

"*Pyat?* (Five?)" he asked.

"Pyat," replied the Chassid.

The officer spun around and exited without another word.

Nachman was finally released in 1960, four years after Reb Asher. A grim life awaited him: his wife had married someone else. She had briefly entertained the notion of returning to him, but Nachman knew that, under Jewish law, such a union was prohibited. He strengthened his religious observance by attending shul three times a day and learning as much Torah as possible.

Nachman's son was by then fourteen and too embarrassed to be seen with his pious father. He refused to hear anything about Torah and mitzvoth. Nachman, greatly bothered, prayed for Divine help in this regard, but his efforts bore no fruit.

Eventually Nachman's son was arrested for black market dealings and sentenced to five years' hard labor. There, the boy had plenty of time to take stock of his life, explore his heritage, and renew a relationship with his father.

Slowly the boy became a *ba'al teshuva.* At long last, Nachman had achieved some measure of joy, *nachas.*

Chapter
FOURTEEN

HAKOFOT ON ICE

Crossing the border and escaping Soviet rule could mean the difference between life and death – and it definitely meant the difference between liberty and religious persecution. But someone had to stay behind to help others leave. Asher Sassonkin was part of a hardy band of Chassidim who risked their lives to let others find their way to freedom.

This special man had moved with his family after World War Two to the border city of Czernowitz, a central hub for Chassidim clamoring to escape the country. Thanks to his dedication, scores of families secured forged documentation enabling their escape. The authorities were somehow notified of his involvement and soon Reb Asher found himself in a gulag along with three thousand other prisoners, some of whom were there for their political beliefs, but most of whom were vicious criminals.

The work camp was divided into small "brigades." Each brigade was led by a "brigadier," a fellow prisoner. Reb Asher spent the first years of his sentence among a particularly bestial bunch. Not a day went by without a wanton murder. The sight of headless corpses became commonplace.

Every day, prisoners went out to cut down trees and erect buildings, but every week Reb Asher found ways to avoid working on Shabbos. For his absences he was severely punished. Keeping in mind the ramifications of these transgressions, it was truly a miracle when the brigadier gave up at one point and decided to ignore him altogether.

When Nachman Ruzman began returning to the faith, thanks to the example shown by Reb Asher, he decided to further emulate this great Chassid and abstain from work on Shabbos. That week, he remained with Reb Asher, feigning illness.

Hardly an hour passed when some prisoners ran into the barracks, shouting, "Where is Ruzman? Who is he?"

Before Nachman could react, Reb Asher jumped up from his cot. "Here I am!"

Nachman watched, transfixed, as Reb Asher was dragged out, thrown into a truck, and taken to the central office for punishment. Amazed at the elder Chassid's sacrifice of his own safety, Nachman scrambled for a hiding place.

Much later, upon his return, Reb Asher told the following story.

> A policeman once stopped two Chassidim on the street, demanding to see their documentation. One of the Chassidim knew his friend had no papers and would surely be arrested, so he started running for his life.
>
> Obviously the policeman took up the chase, shouting at him to stop immediately. When the policeman caught up to him, the Chassid dug into his pockets and brought out his papers.
>
> "So why were you running away?" the officer asked.
>
> "I got scared, so I ran," the Chasid said, with a shrug. Meanwhile, his friend seized the opportunity and escaped.
>
> I felt the same way here. I hoped nothing would happen if I pretended to be you; this way you could escape and hide.
>
> When I was brought to the central office, I stood at the back of the line and waited for hours – until I was the last one left in the room. I gave the officer my papers and he threw them back at me.

"This says *Sassonkin*, not *Ruzman*," he said in disgust. "Get out of here and walk back to your barracks."

"This way," Reb Asher concluded, "we were both saved."

The following Shabbos, Nachman was not so lucky. He was condemned to five days in solitary confinement, where he suffered horribly. But, as the weeks passed, the brigadier decided to forget about Nachman as well. The Chassid and the *ba'al teshuva* were able to abstain from work every Shabbos.

Nachman's family had no idea he had become religious. They continued sending him packages of non-kosher food, which Nachman sold to other prisoners while he ate only kosher. When Pesach arrived, Reb Asher shared the precious matzoth he had received from his family.

Holiday Melody

After some time, Reb Asher was transferred to a different barrack, under the supervision of a different brigadier. The first thing he did was find an unobtrusive corner where he could pray away from hostile eyes.

That first day, while praying in his spot, he overheard a conversation between a prisoner and the brigadier.

"On Saturday one less will be working," the former said. "The Jew refuses to work on his Sabbath."

"Not with me," retorted the brigadier. "He'll work on Saturday like everyone else."

"It's not worth your trouble," argued the prisoner. "He has a reputation for his stubbornness and Sabbath observance. Just forget about him."

The very next day was Shemini Atzeres. The brigadier called over Reb Asher, instructing him to go to work, but the Chassid shook his head, replying that he could not work that day.

"And tomorrow?"

"Also not."

"Why?" asked the surprised brigadier. "Neither today nor tomorrow is *Sabbota*!"

Reb Asher explained quickly that these were the final two days of the Jewish festival of Sukkot called Shemini Atzeres and Simchas Torah. "It is prohibited to work," he concluded.

"I remember seeing Jews erecting wooden huts when the seasons turned cold," mused the brigadier aloud. "I'm willing to allow you to abstain from work, but you must leave together with us and be on site while all the others are working."

Reb Asher quickly agreed.

The next day, a group of about two hundred men arrived at their workplace – a construction site surrounded by layers of barbed wire and filled with structures in various phases of completion. As the workers fanned out to their assigned projects, Reb Asher ducked into a distant building. "A quiet place to pray," he thought, and he immediately began to *daven.*

Absorbed in his prayers, he lost track of time, when suddenly a young prisoner dashed in.

"Here you are!" the latter stuttered. "What are you doing? It's already lunchtime!"

He explained that roll call had been taken, and that the officer, discovering Reb Asher's absence, exploded in rage.

"He threatened to lock our brigadier in solitary confinement for two weeks for letting you off!" the young man exclaimed. "The brigadier is pleading with every excuse he can think of, but the officer insists he be punished."

He grabbed Reb Asher's arm. "Hurry! Maybe you can defuse the situation."

The two of them left the building and hurried over to the place where their brigade was gathered.

The brigadier glanced at Reb Asher sourly. "This is how you repay the favor I did?"

Reb Asher effusively apologized, explaining that he had lost track of the time while praying.

The brigadier calmed down somewhat. "Stay here while we eat lunch."

Reb Asher grew apprehensive. "If the chief became so angry at the brigadier and threatened him with solitary confinement,"

he wondered, "what will happen when he finds me?" He briefly considered running away and hiding, but realized it would only escalate tensions.

Reb Asher steeled himself to be shot on the spot. Much to his surprise, the chief officer strode over, gave him a dagger look, and continued on his way without saying a word.

Later, after the prisoners ate lunch, the brigadier ordered two other prisoners to be responsible for Reb Asher, and threatened them with dire consequences if they lost sight of him. As the sun slipped over the horizon, Reb Asher realized it was already Simchas Torah – yet here he was, stuck in an isolated gulag under guard. He envisioned the prayers and the dancing, the songs being sung in synagogues around the world.

"I am all alone in this godforsaken place," he thought, in despair. "What sort of Simchas Torah is this? If only I could at least sing."

At that moment, one of the two prisoners said, "We are all supposed to be working. It's only because of your holiday that we are exempt, so at least sing for us one of your holiday tunes."

Reb Asher thanked Hashem for the immediate answer to his heartfelt desires. He began to sing the Simchat Torah *hakafa* melody, folding his arms in front of his chest, as though he were in shul, clasping a mantle-covered Torah scroll. Closing his eyes, he began dancing.

"The Gentiles think I'm dancing for them," he thought, "but really, I'm dancing in honor of the Torah."

He continued to move his feet enthusiastically, whirling and jumping as the guards laughed at his antics.

"Bravo! Bravo!" they cried, clapping their hands.

This was only the beginning of his unusual Simchas Torah. At the end of their workday, when the prisoners gathered for roll call, one of Reb Asher's guards announced, "This Jew really knows how to sing and dance. Ask him for a demonstration!"

Realizing that this entertainment might compensate for the earlier kerfuffle caused by his disappearance, Reb Asher leapt even more energetically than before, singing Simchas

Torah melodies, eyes tightly shut. The sight was truly bizarre – a religious Jew singing and dancing as two hundred prisoners watched, clapping their hands to the beat of the songs and chuckling.

In those moments, totally absorbed in his movements, Reb Asher forgot his surroundings – the grueling labor camp, the primitive conditions, his loneliness and imprisonment. He remembered only that he was a Chassid, dancing on Simchas Torah. In his heart and soul, he was participating furiously in the lively celebrations in the shul of his beloved Rebbe, as he had always done in years past, and he prayed he would be able to do so again in the future.

Chapter
FIFTEEN

NO ONE CAN TELL YOU

Yaakov Koppel Pasternak was born in Lutsk, administrative center of the Volyn region and one of the oldest cities of Ukraine, dating back to the tenth century. Not only did his father Rav Meir Akiva impart him with a Torah-true education, he raised Yaakov to embrace Yiddishkeit and defy persecution.

"Always remember this cardinal rule," Rav Meir Akiva told Yaakov. "No one, but no one, can tell a member of the Jewish faith to abandon their religious life." Under Stalin's rule, the Soviet Union was a particularly dangerous place to live with such ideals.

During World War Two, Reb Yaakov managed to escape the daily bombings in Poland and move to Birzai, a city in Lithuania. The country was independent until 1940, when Stalin annexed all the Baltic States and the country became a Communist satellite.

On June 14, 1941, at the close of Shabbos, Reb Yaakov had just returned from the synagogue to his lodgings when he heard a pounding on his door.

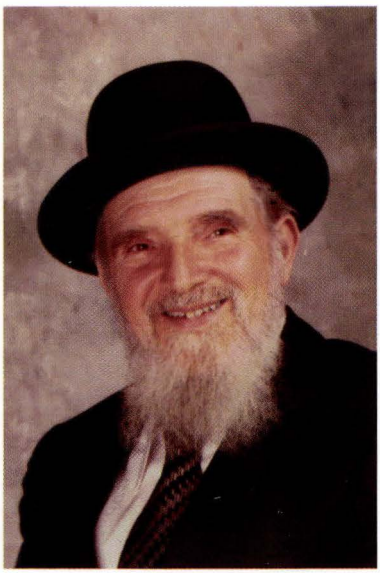
Pounding on doors late at night could only mean one thing.

"Police!" someone shouted from outside. "Open up immediately!"

Reb Yaakov opened the door and seven officers burst in. Three were in civilian garb.

The officer in charge barked questions at Reb Yaakov about personal information, comparing the answers to a document he withdrew from his jacket.

"You are under arrest for teaching in a yeshiva," he declared. "Search this house. We were informed that you are hiding guns somewhere."



Reb Yaakov Koppel Pasternak

Reb Yaakov had to think fast. A small suitcase tucked in the corner of the room would be his undoing: it contained the names and addresses of yeshiva students trying to procure escape visas. Were these papers discovered, they would be far worse than a cache of munitions.

"My personal effects are hidden in the synagogue," he blurted.

The officers stopped searching, and turned to their chief officer for further instruction.

"We will go to the synagogue," declared the latter, brandishing a pistol. "You will take us there." And he scowled. "Don't try to escape! One false move and I will shoot you dead."

Reb Yaakov breathed a sigh of relief. The suitcase had escaped detection. He walked outside in the frigid night, followed by the officers, their shadows snaking down the empty streets. Upon entering the synagogue, Reb Yaakov pointed to his seat, and the officers quickly shoved him away.

"We will search for munitions," they ordered. "Don't move."

To Reb Yaakov's amazement, an officer withdrew a *tefillin* bag and with trembling hands removed the *tefillin*.

"What is this?" he stammered. "A grenade? Some sort of bomb?"

"Grenade?" Reb Yaakov exclaimed. "Why, those are religious articles. Jews pray to G-d every day; we wear those during our prayers?"

The officer flushed crimson in rage and embarrassment. "Idiot! Stop with this foolishness!"

Sensing his arrest, Reb Yaakov reached for his precious *tefillin*, hoping to take them along, but halted at the deranged shouting of the officers.

"Don't touch that!" they yelled. "You want to be killed? Follow us!"

Reb Yaakov followed them to the train station. A locomotive waited on the tracks, clouds of steam billowing into the dark night. The windows of the railcars had been blacked out, lending the scene an even greater pall.

Reb Yaakov was shoved into one of the cars, where he found other Jews who had been rounded up that evening. The train lurched forward.

Hours turned into days as the train clattered ever northward. Chassidim and political prisoners stood cramped in cattle cars. Each day, through a small opening, a few loaves of hard bread were tossed in, along with a container of brackish water. A crude hole in a corner of the car served as latrine. Days followed one another into a blur, the hellish journey lasting no less than six weeks.

No Vacation

The group was led all the way to the Ob, a tributary river in Western Siberia (and one of the longest rivers in the world). After being placed on boats and ferried to a large Siberian city, they were separated and dispersed to different locations. By the grace of G-d, Reb Yaakov remained with a few of his friends; however, their location remained a mystery. (This was

intentional on the part of the authorities, who aimed to dehumanize prisoners even further by robbing them of the ability to inform others of their whereabouts.)

Reb Yaakov was ordered to lodge in the one-room dwelling of a local peasant family, who made him a "bed" by placing a pile of straw in a corner. Exhausted, he collapsed onto the straw and slept fitfully for three days. On the third day, the peasant shook Reb Yaakov awake.

"Someone has arrived from Moscow," he said. "The prisoners have to hear him speak. You need to go now."

Reb Yaakov staggered outside and joined the others making their way to an assembly area. In spite of the official's Uzbekistani dialect, Reb Yaakov was able to get the gist of the speech, in which the officer thanked the kolkhoz for agreeing to house the prisoners (what choice did they have?) before he exhorted the national importance of communal work.

Suddenly a commotion broke out.

"We also have an announcement," a voice shouted out. "We will not work on Shabbos!"

The officer turned purple with rage. "How dare you! There is no vacation from helping the Motherland. Everyone is expected to work – every day."

It was too late. The brave voice had fanned the flickering embers. One by one, more Jewish voices chanted the refrain, *We will not work on Shabbos!* This was quickly followed by threats of a hunger strike – unless the group was allowed to refrain from eating non-kosher food.

The staid assembly dissolved into frenzied chorus. Although the situation could have taken a dangerous turn – insubordination risked beatings, solitary confinement and death – the prisoners were miraculously granted permission to abstain from non-kosher food. This concession quieted the crowd, but the refusal to work on Shabbos festered.

Every week, on Friday afternoons, groups of prisoners hid in the forest, refusing to appear for work until after Shabbos. Every week they were threatened, the instigators severely punished – but nothing further could be gained by antagonism. Reb Yaakov

and his friends were adamant in their refusal to work on Shabbos, even if it meant certain death.

Prisoners were forced to cut trees in the Siberian forest for the war effort, but this group was treated with particular cruelty. New deprivations were added to make their lives even more unbearable. In protest, the group began working much slower, considerably affecting their output – and nothing the officials did could rectify the situation.

The prisoners sang *Tehillim*, Psalms, as they worked, pretending the trees were singing along in harmony. Did those Siberian forests ever ring with the singing of *Tehillim*? I doubt it. Reb Yaakov later related that the group became extra emotional at the verse *Look to the right and see that no one regards me; there is no refuge for me; no one cares for my soul* (142:5).

Whenever the Jewish holidays coincided with a regular weekday, the situation was exacerbated. Kolkhoz officials held heated meetings, railing against the group for adding more "vacation" days besides Shabbos – but nothing helped. The group was prepared to lay down their lives rather than desecrate Shabbos or Yomtov. Hashem in His infinite mercies orchestrated matters so that no one was murdered for keeping these days holy.

Saved by History

Miraculously, Reb Yaakov was able to smuggle a few *seforim* — including a few volumes of Talmud — between his clothing and bring them to Siberia. He tore these *seforim* into sections, handing a few pages to every person in the group. These precious pages were kept in the lining of their threadbare jackets, enabling the group to hold impromptu *shiurim* in *Gemara* whilst their supervisors were away. Just imagine the scene: emaciated prisoners of war exiled to labor in the freezing Siberian forests for their religious beliefs, studying Torah in those same forests! This scene serves as further proof of the eternal spirit of the Jewish soul that can never be vanquished.

Reb Yaakov's Siberian exile lasted close to three years. However, the exile actually had saved his life. Just two weeks after his

arrest in Lithuania came the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. On August 8, 1941, the 2,400 Jews of Birzai were rounded up by the Gestapo and Lithuanian collaborators and shot in a mass grave outside a forest grove. During the war the town itself was almost completely burned down.

Rav Yaakov's exile was followed by years of upheavals: hard labor in the district of Nekrasovka, then another transfer even further north to Stavropol Urban Okrug. A few weeks of further travel would have deposited the group near the North Pole!

Finally, in 1946, the group became emboldened by historical developments. In Poland, thousands of Polish independence fighters, inspired by the late Polish general and premier of the Polish Government-in-Exile, Władysław Sikorski, attacked offices of the NKVD and the Polish Communist secret service. Events escalated to a civil war. Members of the Polish Home Army were rounded up by the NKVD and deported to Siberia. Overseas, thousands of Poles who had fought for their government-in-exile during World War Two were being mobilized. Soldiers trekked by ship, train, or foot across the Carpathians with one goal: to remobilize and fight for their homeland's freedom.

In Siberia, thousands of Poles who had been exiled or imprisoned following the attack and annexation of their region by Russia during World War Two were promised repatriation by Stalin, who sought to establish a Communist regime. Reb Yaakov's group, seizing the opportunity, posed as Polish nationals as well, but they ended up stranded. Poland had balked at welcoming back her Jewish citizens, leaving them for last.

In the end, the Jewish prisoners came out ahead. They later learned how fortunate they were to have been delayed release: mass graves in the forests, such as those at Katyn early in the war, were found, filled with Polish nationals – slaughtered by the Russians, who had reneged on their promise to release the prisoners.

In 1948, after two years of multiple petitions to Moscow, Reb Yaakov and his group were released, and escorted under Russian guard back to Poland – whence it was easier to escape to the West. At last, their ordeal was over.

Chapter
SIXTEEN

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

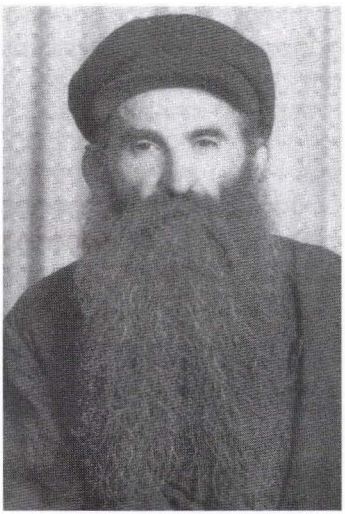
While Jews throughout Russia were being jailed, beaten, and tortured – and many murdered – Stalin plotted further torment by isolating them in a remote area in Siberia. Forty thousand barracks were prepared, ostensibly to "save" the Jewish citizens from Russian hordes and pogroms in the cities.

The police focused first on Chabad Chassidim – basically the only ones with a vibrant Jewish presence in the country. The police relied on a test: if someone was seen reciting *Tehillim*, Psalms, after *davening*, it was the indicator of a zealot, a Torah-observant Jew to be tagged for constant surveillance.

They were right. Chabad Chassidim who said *Tehillim* after prayer service, as per the request of the Rebbe Rayatz, remained dedicated to the dissemination of Yiddishkeit. Yet this mission had become increasingly difficult as Chassidim in increasing numbers fled the country. Many moved to New York, to be with the Rebbe; others settled in Europe and the Holy Land. Those who stayed behind shouldered the tremendous responsibility of religious revival, despite the ever-present danger to their lives.

Shortly after the passing of the Rebbe Rayatz, in 5710 (1950), Berke Chein was issued an exit visa. Chassidim gathered for a

secret *farbrengen,* taking informal leave of this esteemed Chassid. When the Soviets allowed Polish citizens to return home, Reb Berke tried his hand at forging Polish passports and crossing the border near Lemberg. Sadly, he did not realize that the police were following his steps; he was arrested a mere half hour away from the border! His shattered family returned to Russia, where they awaited word of the verdict.



Reb Berke Chein

After a long and brutal interrogation, Reb Berke was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment. Incredibly, his wife Feigel managed to bribe the right officials to have him released. Thus began a tragic era for Reb Berke, who took up a life of wandering, staying one step ahead of the authorities. He could not even tell his family of his whereabouts. For many years, his own wife had no clue whether or not he was even alive.

Despite the extenuating circumstances, Reb Berke remained a Chassid of stature, continuing to *daven* at great length every day and taking great pains to keep every custom. At one point, he realized that Samarkand was so remote from the central cities that he would find some refuge there.

Open Secret

Reb Berke arrived safely in Samarkand. His presence greatly enriched our lives. We took our children to watch how a Chassid prayed, how a Chassid ate, how a Chassid acted. His piety was astounding: he was a true master over his emotions and baser instincts. Nothing in the world deterred him from immersion in the *mikvah* – a frigid river – every morning. How he did this, day in and day out, without getting sick remained a mystery.

For the longest time, Reb Berke's presence in Samarkand remained a secret. Few in the Jewish community even knew he was there. After a few years, once his legal residence was established, Reb Berke was finally able to join the minyan and all were able to hear the way he *davened* – in such a heartfelt manner that even the biggest cynic was moved to tears.

Our biggest gain were his *farbrengens.* Reb Berke kept us fascinated for hours on end as he wove Chassidic teachings peppered with stories of Rebbes and great disciples, inspiring us to improve even further in our spiritual service.

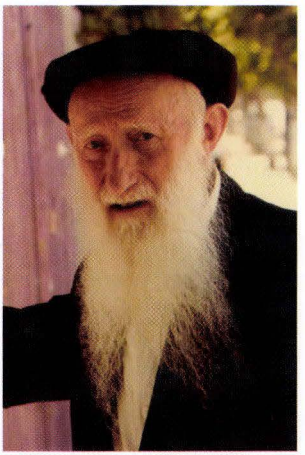
Until then afraid to reveal his location, Reb Berke finally agreed to write a letter to his wife, informing her that he was alive and well – and living among Chassidim. After so many years, his wife's reaction was unimaginable. It took another agonizing year for all the paperwork to be in order, enabling Feigel to reunite with her missing husband. The entire Chabad community came out to greet her, honoring this great lady for the suffering she had endured.

After reuniting with his wife, Reb Berke felt that the time had come to apply for an exit visa. As soon as his papers arrived, he arranged to leave immediately, not wanting to spend an extra day in this accursed land. While elated to hear of his release, we felt dejected at the thought of losing this revered figure in our community.

Aunt Nechamah

During these desperate and tragic times, Chamah was established. An acronym for *Chavurat M'zakei HaRabim,* this organization would unite Chassidim scattered throughout the Soviet Union, in the hopes of bringing them closer to their goal of Jewish outreach to the younger generation. Only one hurdle remained as far as launching this organization: securing the approval of the Rebbe.

We decided to use Reb Berke as liaison to Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the new Rebbe. Reb Berke agreed, and we took leave of this esteemed Chassid with hugs and tears.



Reb Moshe Nissilevitch

Some time passed before a cleverly worded reply arrived from the Rebbe. (As the Soviets read and censored all correspondence, we learned to communicate in code.) In his letter to a member of our community, the Rebbe wrote, *How is Aunt NeCHAMAH feeling?* – a reference to our organization.

I cannot describe the elation at receiving the Rebbe's approval. Rabbi Moshe Nissilevitch, then a man merely in his twenties but already an inspirational figure in the Jewish underground (he was called "the blond Reb Moshe" in deference to his flowing blond beard), gathered a few fellow young adults and swore them to secrecy. He initiated all the charity programs – funds to help the needy; distribution of thousands of tons of coal to the poor for the winter; food staples and packages for the holidays. They arranged wedding ceremonies, *brissim,* holiday celebrations, and funerals. Actions were taken to bolster the morale of the Jewish people and educate the young. In Moscow they even managed, in 5717 (1957) and 5726 (1966), to publish *siddurim,* which were distributed throughout the country.

In later correspondence the Rebbe sometimes wrote, *I hope you can help Aunt Nechamah* – again alluding to his request that we help Chamah achieve its ideals. Its programs encompassed over thirty cities in the Soviet Union. To maintain secrecy, hundreds of the people involved had no knowledge of the true scope of Chamah's activities – even in their own cities! Looking back today, it is unbelievable to fathom the success of this organization.

In the 1960s, Chamah organized public Simchas Torah *hakofot* at the synagogues in Moscow and Leningrad for university students and other Russian youth, whose curiosity was awakened by this spirited show of religion. In following years, tens of thousands of young Jews were celebrating Simchas Torah.

Matters really snowballed from there. These *hakofot* led to mass demonstrations for Aliyah that garnered international attention and support. For many in the outside world, this was their introduction to the religious oppression of Soviet Jewry. After numerous speeches, national and international commissions, and fundraising drives, hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews moved permanently to Israel. For many, this was the culmination of years of hope and longing. No longer living as second-class citizens, they anticipated a new page and a new life as proud Jews.

But the Holy Land presented difficult challenges – i.e. new language, customs – and many immigrants began to have second thoughts. Once again, the same Chamah activists who devoted their lives to Yiddishkeit behind the Iron Curtain now helped these people acclimate and learn about their heritage. Under Soviet rule, the vast majority had possessed only a vague



From right to left: Syoma Boruchov, Moshiach Chudaidatov, Binyomin Malachovsky, Moishe Volodsky, Bentzion Chein, Yakov Lerner, Hillel Zaltzman, Noach Chudaidatov.

understanding of Judaism with little chance to experience its beauty.

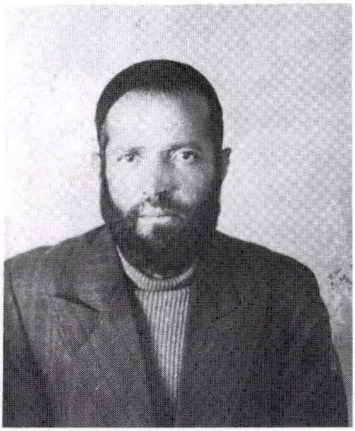
Chamah quickly evolved into an international humanitarian organization, providing food for the poor and elderly, as well as education and medical assistance. Its programs, successfully initiated so many decades earlier, continue to help and inspire newer generations toward commitment to Jewish observance.



Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov receiving Kos Shel Brachah from the Rebbe



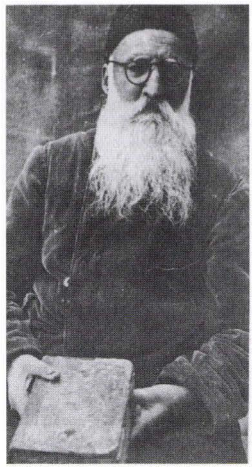
Rabbi Ari Chai Yagudaev



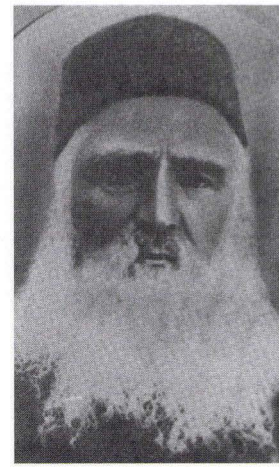
Reb Moshe Yaakubov



Talmidim and close friends, family of Rabbi Niyazov in Samarkand



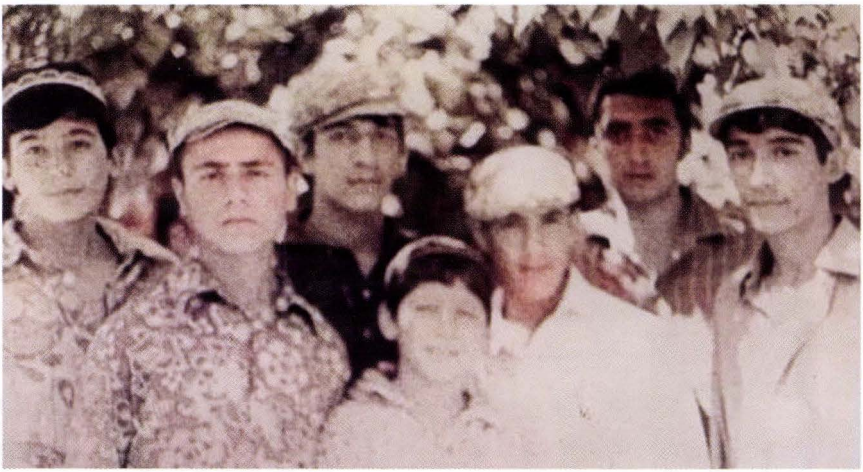
Rabbi Aryeh Yagudav



Rabbi Yehuda Kandov



Farbrengen in Samarkand



Right to left: Polat Elishayev, Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov, Simcha Abdurachmanov, Rafie Yesupov, Amnun Elishayev, Edzik Elishayev, Yair Elishayev



Right to left sitting: Moshe Michielov, Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov, Yair Elishayev, Yasha Borochov.
Right to left standing: Moshe Elishayev, Yisrael Niyazov, Rachmin Niyazov, unknown, Rafie Yesupov.



Chassidim dancing.
Right to left: Rabbi Yerachmiel Chadas, Rabbi Eliyahu Levin, Rabbi Galechovsky.
Above right to to left: Rabbi Berke Schiff and Rabbi Meir Hirch Gansberg



Right to left: Rabbi Elazer Aryeh Jungreis (Chenger Rov), Reb Aaron Shamelshvilli, Reb Mottel Jungreis (Nikolsburg Rov), Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov, Rabbi Gavriel Niyazov.



Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov greeting former Sefardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Bakshi Doron



Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov greeting Chief Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, in Boro Park along with Rabbi Nassirov and Rabbi Josephy



Rabbi Yitzchak Ushpal at the upshernish – haircutting cermony of the author's son Yitzchak Niyazov 1981



Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov (left) acting as Mohel on his nephew; Rabbi Gavriel (center) is acting as Sandek



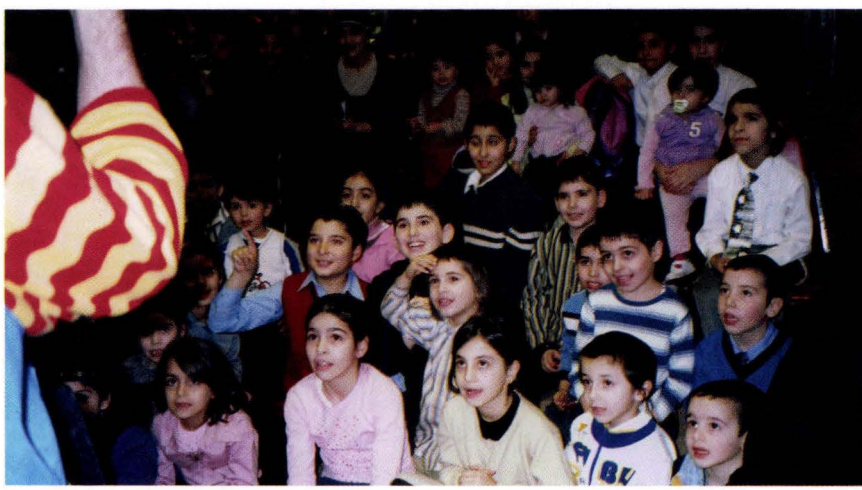
Members of L'Maan Achai Bukharim in Rabbi Niyazov's Shul on 41st Street
Bottom right to left: Binyomin Gilkarov, Mishael Zargarov, Avraham Leviev, Rabbi Niyazov, Pinchas Yagudaev, unknown, Boruch Chai Sulimanov, Jake Sulimanov.
Middle row right to left: Nissim Gilkarov, Moshiach Davrayov, Avraham Siyonov, Yisroel Elishayov, Yehuda Sulimanov, Refoel Shamalov, Elusha Shamalov, Efraim Yesupov, Meir Kohinov.
Top row right to left: Refoel Davidov, Rachamim Gilkarov.



Rabbi Niyazov visiting his prize student Rabbi Emmanuel Shimonov and other Bukharian Jews in Samarkand 1991



Rabbi Niyazov (left) being visited at his office on 47th Street by one of his prize students Rabbi Emmanuel Shimonov



Celebrating Chanukah with Bukharian children in Boro Park



Rabbi Niyazov introducing Rabbi Pannet at a farbrengen located at the Bukharian shul on 41st Street



Rabbi Niyazov with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon



Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov (left) visiting his cousin Rabbi Yisroel Niyazov at his home in Stamford Hill, London and presenting him with his book "Bukharian Kosher Cuisine"



Bukharian boys visiting Rabbi Niyazov at his home



Rabbi Niyazov with some of his talmidim and congregants in the Bukharian shul on 41st Street
Bottom row right to left: Boruch Musayev, Simcha Yesupov, Eliyahu Mordechaiav.
Middle row right to left: Tzion Musayev, Shimon Netalenov, Gavriel Arronov,
Rabbi Mordechai Chazzan Rachaminov, Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov, Yisroel
Elishayev, Elusha Shamalov, Moshiach Davrayov. Top row: Simcha Gurkov.



Celerbrating one of hundreds of bar mitzvahs in L'Maan Achai Bukharim.
Left to right: Rabbi Niyazov, Zelig Skur, Yisroel Skur, Gavriel Gilkarov.



Rabbi Niyazov on one of many outings with the children of his community to the Statue of Liberty and other sightseeing destinations. Left to right: Lazar Mirakov, Edward Katanov, Avi Shalomav, Yura Gadaev, Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov, Reuven Katanov, Shmuel Katanov, Joroboy Matayov. Further right: Pisar Leviev, Gavriel Davidov. Bottom row: Tzion Musayev with his son Avraham, and 2 daughters, Batya Niyazov, and many other boys and girls.



Several of the hundreds of talmidim and employees that went through Rabbi Niyazov's work place on 47th Street



Several of Rabbi Niyazov's talmidim and employees at his factory at 47th Street where he taught Torah and employed hundreds of Bukharian youth. Right to left: Yossie Leviev, Dovid Fathakhov, Tzion Khaimov, Rachamim Abidov. Left to right: Rabbi Shlomo Chai with his uncle Rabbi Zerubavel Niyazov and others.



Rabbi Emmanuel Shimonov visiting Rabbi Niyazov's Congregation L'Maan Achai Bukharim in Boro Park, 41st Street. Front right to left: Yehuda Sulimanov, Boruch Chai Sulimanov, Yosef Yakubov, Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov, Rabbi Emmanuel Shimonov. 2nd row left to right: Tzion Musayev, Simcha Yesupov, Eliyahu Mordechaiov, Nissan Babachanov, Alik Babachanov, Abbo Mulakandov, Yisroel Niyazov, Ari Chai Siyunov, Pinchas Babachanov, Rabbi Malkiel Yiztchakov, Aaron Siyunov.



Visiting a Synagogue in Manhattan.
Right to left: Rabbi Niyazov, Tzion Khaimov, David Shakarov, Yura Gadaev.



Selling chometz Erev Pesach with Rabbi Menashe Klein



Right to left: Yosef Yakubov, Meir Chai Kohinov, Reb Gavriel Niyazov, Nissan Arabov



Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov with Rabbi Avraham Pam



Several of Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov's talmidim and employees at his factory at 47th Street where he taught Torah and employed hundreds of Bukharian youth



Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov presenting his book "Mesiras Nefesh Shel Yehudei Bukhara" to Rabbi Avraham Hecht.
Left to right: Rabbi Fish, Rabbi Avraham Hecht, Rabbi Yitzchok Niyazov, Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov, Yehoshua Shamel, Rabbi Boris Kohinov



Rabbi Niyazov hosting the monthly Igud HaRabonim (Rabbinical Alliance of America) gathering at L'Maan Achai Bukharim, 41st Street, Boro Park. Rabbi Niyazov is seated among several of his congregants and rabbis, including Rabbis Avrahom Hecht, Gershon Tannenbaum, Eisner, Katz, Chananya Elbaz, Noach Bernstein



Wedding of Rabbi Niyazov's eldest son Avraham Niyazov in Crown Heights, Oholei Torah Hall. Left to right: Rabbi Shlomo Aryeh Niyazov, Yosef Yakubov, Binyomin Chafizov, Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov, Rabbi Malkiel Yitzchakov, Rabbi Yigal Chaimoff, Tzion Khaimov, Yehoshua Shamel



Rabbi Niyazov visiting with Rabbi Emmanuel Shimonov and Rabbi Boris Kohinov



Rabbi Niyazov invited to an event to inspire teenage youth



Rabbi Niyazov presenting Rabbi Yisroel Belsky with his sefer "Mesiras Nefesh shel Yehudei Bukhara"



Rabbi Malkiel Yitzchakov dancing and carrying Rabbi Niyazov on his shoulders at a Siyum Sefer Torah, for L'Maan Achai Bukharim, 41st Street

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CITY OF NEW YORK

Citation

Whereas, Brooklyn is proud home to the largest Jewish population outside of Israel—a special distinction that has given rise to our reputation as the Yiddishkeit capital of America—it is only fitting that this office recognize those outstanding institutions serving our vibrant and dynamic Jewish communities, and those individuals who demonstrate an outstanding commitment to the preservation and well-being of the Jewish community and provide generous support to organizations that increase public awareness, knowledge, and appreciation of Jewish heritage and culture; and

Whereas, the Chief Rabbi of the Bukharian Jewish community Rabbi Itzchak Yehoshua, President Boris Kandov, and the members and supporters of the Bukharian Jewish Community Center gather together to host their Legislative Breakfast and to pay tribute to Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov—a great Rabbi born in Samarkand to a famous rabbinical family who learned how to teach Torah under the Russian anti religion regime—Rabbi Niyazov has been the Rabbi of the Leman Achai Congregation on Boro Park for the past twenty-five years, and it is today that he is honored for his leadership and dedication to the Bukharian Jewish community in Brooklyn and beyond; and

Whereas, on behalf of the people of Brooklyn, I salute the Bukharian Jewish Community Center for hosting this event, and I commend Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov for his visionary leadership and ongoing dedication to the Center's goal to meet the cultural spiritual, and educational needs of Bukharian Jews of all generations, and his commitment to the Bukharian community, I congratulate him as he is most justifiably paid tribute here today, and I thank him for his tireless efforts on behalf of the Bukharian Jewish community, and for making Brooklyn and beyond a better place to live, work, and raise a family;

Now, therefore, I, Marty Markowitz, President of the Borough of Brooklyn, do hereby confer this citation on

Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the Borough of Brooklyn to be affixed this 9th day of March, 2008.

President of the Borough of Brooklyn



Boris Kandov, President of the Congress of Bukharian Jews of USA and Canada, congratulating Rabbi Niyazov on the Siyum Sefer Torah (completion of writing a Sefer Torah).



Receieving Citation from former State Senator of New York and former borough President of Brooklyn Marty Markowitz



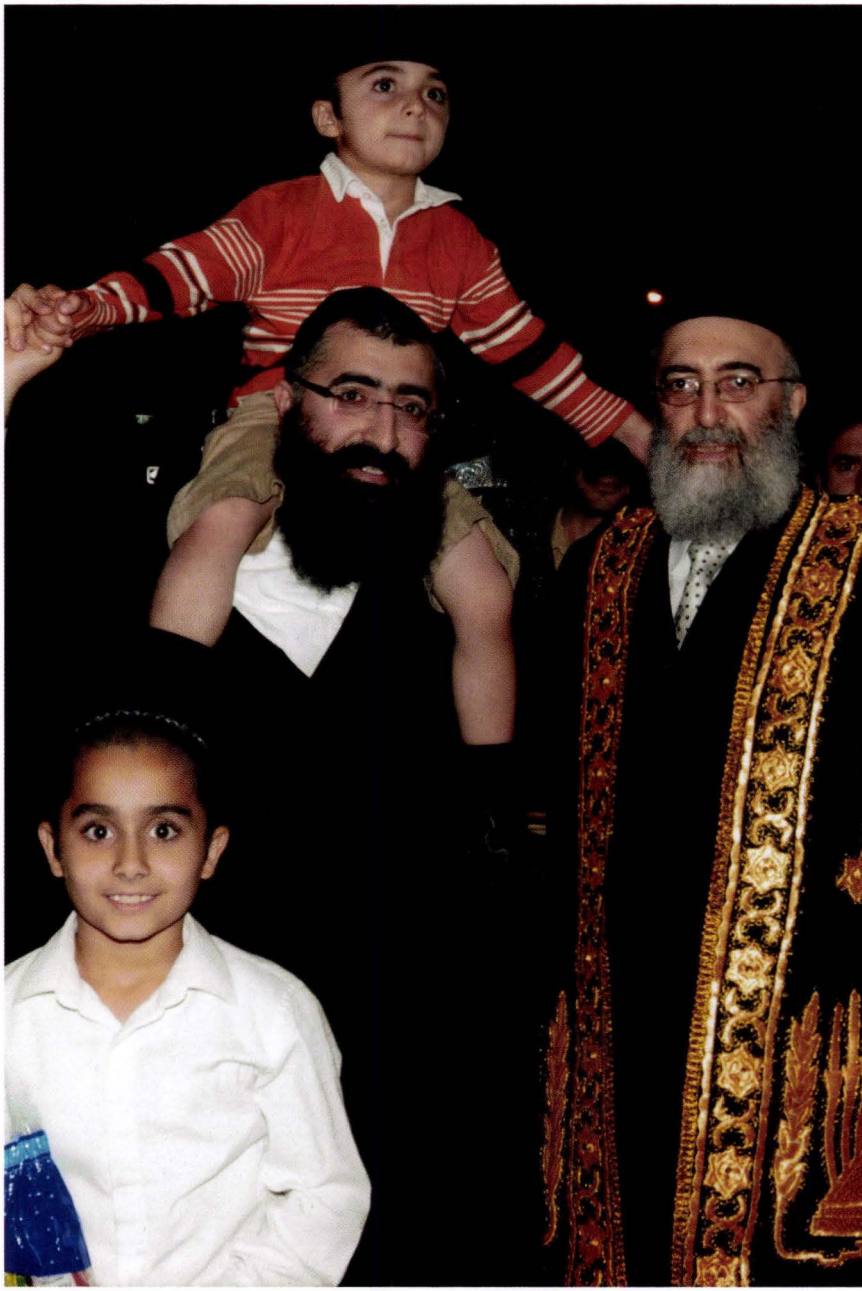
Nissan Arabov, with Rabbi Niyazov, receiving a letter by the new Torah Scroll



Rabbi Shaul Kassin, Chief Rabbi of the Syrian Community, with Rabbi Niyazov



Rabbi Niyazov celebrating a new Sefer Torah with his Bukharian community in Boro Park, 2003.
Top left to right: Avraham Niyazov, Gavriel Borochov, Eliyahu Niyazov,
Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov, Gavriel Gilkarov, Nerya Shimonov, Avi Siyonov,
Yakkov Yakubov, Yaakov Dayanov, Mordechai Chafizov, Ronien.
Bottom left to right: Danial Gikarov and Asher Zelig.



Rabbi Niyazov with his eldest son Avraham and grandsons Menachem Mendel and Pinchas Meir celebrating a new Torah scroll in the streets of Boro Park



Rabbi Niyazov with philanthropist Lev Leviev at a fundraising dinner



Rabbi Nassirov dancing with Rabbi Niyazov



Presenting a portrait of the Rebbe to Jacob (the Jeweler) Arabov as a token of appreciation for his acts of goodness and kindness



Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov receiving, on behalf of his congregation, a Proclamation issued by Councilman Bradford S. Lander, member of the 39th District of the New York City Council at a community event of a Siyum Sefer Torah

COUNCIL MEMBER
BRAD LANDER

CITY OF NEW YORK

Proclamation

Whereas: *Brad Lander, Council Member of the 39th District, is proud to honor Congregation Lemaan Achai Bukharim, on the occasion of the Simchat Torah Celebration, for its extraordinary service to the borough of Brooklyn and to the greater City of New York; and*

WHEREAS: *Established thirty years ago by Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov, Congregation Lemaan Achai Bukharim became the first Bukharian synagogue opened in the United States; and*

WHEREAS: *Thousands of families have made Borough Park their first home after immigrating from Uzbekistan; and*

WHEREAS: *Congregation Lemaan Achai Bukharim has provided countless immigrants with a sense of community while supporting their religious observance; and*

WHEREAS: *Through the Synagogue and many other programs, Congregation Lemaan Achai Bukharim has assisted thousands of immigrants from Uzbekistan and their young families build new lives in New York; and*

WHEREAS: *With its avid immigrant community efforts, Congregation Lemaan Achai Bukharim has expanded its services to hundreds of new Americans and their families, and a greater proportion of the population of New York City; and*

WHEREAS: *Congregation Lemaan Achai Bukharim has truly excelled in its endeavors and it is worthy of our enduring gratitude; now, therefore*

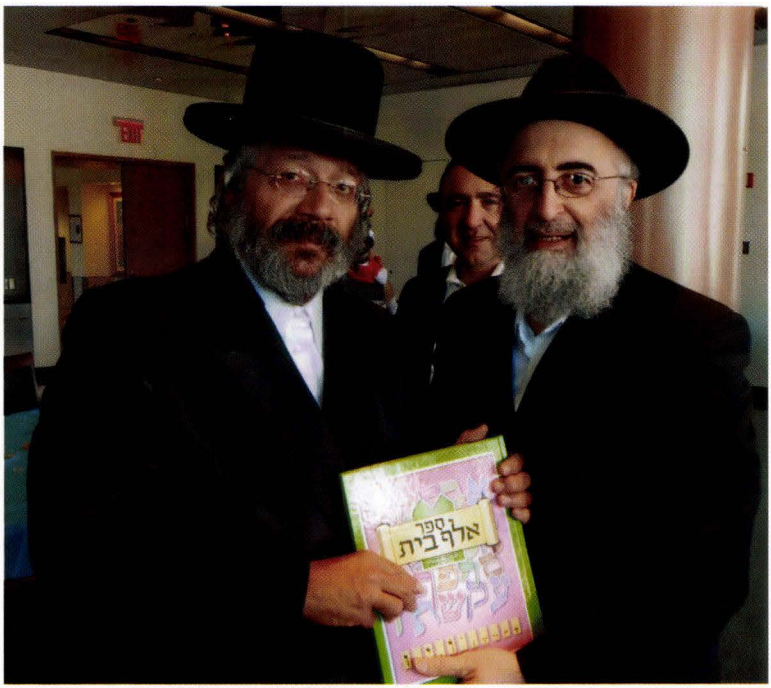
BE IT KNOWN: *That Brad Lander, Council Member of the 39th District, gratefully honors*

Congregation Lemaan Achai Bukharim

for its outstanding service and contributions to the community, both within the borough of Brooklyn and throughout New York City.

Signed this 3rd day of October in the year Two Thousand and Ten.

BRAD LANDER
Council Member, 39th District
Brooklyn



Rabbi Niyazov at the Jewish Children's Museum celebrating the Upshernish of his 3-year-old grandson Elchonon Baumgarten with Rabbi Niyazov's brother-in-laws Rabbi Mottel Jungreis (Nikolsburg Rov) and Yochai Yagudaev



Rabbi Niyazov with Rabbi Moshe Meir Wiess



Rabbi Niyazov with Rabbi Yitzchak Mishulovin



Rabbi Niyazov with Rabbi Berel Zaltzman, one of his underground teachers in Samarkand



Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov greeting Rabbi Avraham Aaron Rubashkin



Rabbi Niyazov visiting Rabbi Rosenfeld, Rov of the Tzemach Tzedek Shul, Boro Park



Rabbinical Alliance Rosh Chodesh Tammuz gathering hosted in Rabbi Niyazov's shul. Right to left: Rabbi Herschel Kurzrock, Rabbi Avrohom Hecht, Rabbi Eliyahu Ben Chaim, Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov



Attending a rabbinic gathering in Queens



At a Siyum Sefer Torah in Queens.
Left to right: Rabbi Shlomo Nisanov, Rabbi Sasson Mr. Yisroel Davidov, Rabbi Yigal Haimoff, Mr. Boris Keikov, Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov, Rabbi Yuval Noff



Motzei Yom Kippur at L'Maan Achai Bukharim, 41st Street, Boro Park.
First row left to right: Rafael Gavrielov, Eddie, Avraham Matayov, Yehoshua Shamel, Yaakov Dayanov, Abba Babajanov, Simcha Yesupov, Daniel, Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov, Rabbi Asher Cohen, Yosef Yakubov, Yair Niyazov, Tzion Siyunov, Rabbi Yitzchak Niyazov, Bobo Levy, Refoel Davidov.



Rabbi Niyazov distributing the traditional apple and honey on Hoshana Rabba to the congregants



Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov presenting an apple and honey on Hoshana Raba to Rabbi Asher Cohen, acclaimed Chazan and assistant rabbi at L'Maan Achai Bukharim, 41st Street



Siyum Sefer Torah for L'Maan Achai Bukharim.
Bottom left to right: Rabbis Yitzchok Yehoshua, Binyomin Matayov.
Top left to right: Rabbis Malkiel Yitzchakov, Shlomo
Chai Niyazov, unknown, Yosef Yakubov



Rabbi Niyazov celebrating a new Torah scroll for his Bukharian community in Boro Park, 41st Street. Right to left: Dr. Arkady Israelov, Rabbi Niyazov, Yosef Yakubov, Ron Yefet, Aaron Siyunov, Nissan Arabov, Yitzchok Niyazov, Yehoshua Shamel, Avraham Niyazov, Rachamin Hafizov, Sasson Chaimov, Boruch Yagudaev.



Rabbi Niyazov celebrating a completion of a new Torah scroll to be used for his community L'Maan Achai Bukharim. Right to left: Eliyahau Mani, Gavriel Davidov, Sasson Haimov, Yehuda Chaim Kushmakov, Refael Yadgarov, Tzfania Shimunov, Mordechai Hafizov, Daniel Elishayev, Nerya Shimuov, Eliyahu Niyazov, Avraham Talmasov, Rabbi Malkiel Yitzchakov, Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov, Avi Siyunov, Gavriel Borochov, Shmuel Katanov, Benny Hafizov, Yosef Yakubov. Bottom row left to right: Ilan Dayanov, Yosef Yitzchakov, Yehoshua Shamel.



Rabbi Niyazov being presented with a bottle of Lechaim by Rabbi Yechiel Abuchaztera



Rabbi Niyazov selling the chometz Erev Pesach
with the Belzer Dayan Rabbi Gross in Boro Park



Rabbi Niyazov affixing a mezuzah on one of the entrances to his newly renovated shul Cong Lmaan Achai Bukharim, in Boro Park.



First row left to right: Arsen Yonatayev, Gavriel Gilkarov, Malkiel Yiztchakov, Boris Kandov, Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov, Rabbi Boruch Babaev, Benny Gavrilov, Rabbi Avraham Niyazov, Avraham Siyunov, Rabi Zerubavel Niyazov, Yosef Yakubov. Second row left to right: Joroboy Matayov, Yaakov Dayanov, Rabbi Asher Cohen, Rabbi Zalman Zevulonov, Rabbi Yitzchak Wolowik, Tzion Siyunov, Arthur Gavrilov, Dr. Arkady Israelov, Sasson Chaimov, Mishael Niyazov, Rabbi Yitzchak Niyazov.



Rabbi Niyazov presenting Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef with his sefer "Mesiras Nefesh shel Yehudei Bukhara"

Bokhari rabbi prays with local Russians

By MARTHA BARKER

Until ten years ago Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov was mohel, sofer and shochet in his hometown of Samarkand, Uzbekistan, USSR. He set up religious schools and worked hard to keep Judaism alive for the Jews of his city.

All that changed when he immigrated to New York where he founded *La Ma'an A Chai Shel Bokharim* (For the Sake of Our Brothers of the Bokhara Community), a congregation now numbering about 120 families.

"Because the Jews gathered in Bokhara in those old days, they have kept their kinship alive, all over Russia and all over the world," said Eitz Chaim's Rabbi Avraham Feigelstock. The shul in New York was established to keep the Bokhari ways of worship alive, he added.

A proud descendant of the rich traditions of the Bokhari people, Rabbi Nivazov told *The Bulletin* he knows well the story of these ancient Jews who settled in the city of Bokhara about 900 years ago, fanning out to Tashkent and Samarkand. They eventually spread to Israel and America and around the globe (there is even a family in Vancouver).

The religious devotion of Bokhari Jews is itself legendary. The Rabbi spun fascinating tales for *The Bulletin* of the energetic and continual commitment to the education of Russian young people he and others of his community had while he still lived in the USSR. He managed to keep three schools open even under the most difficult circumstances. Often he had to change the location of one or another of the schools to escape detection. On other occasions he took chances in order to exercise his Torah reading duties.

This characteristic commitment shone through as he related how he came to lead



RABBI NIYAZOV

High Holy Day services in Russian at Eitz Chaim synagogue in Richmond this fall.

An unexpected problem arose with the papers of Rabbi David Abramov, a student of Niyazov also from New York, who had originally agreed to come for the special holiday services in Russian.

"The way it works," said Eitz Chaim's Rabbi Avraham Feigelstock, "his (Abramov's) refugee papers would allow him to enter Canada but he could not return to the U.S. without an American passport. Passports take a few months to process. Rabbi Abramov didn't know this."

Rabbi Niyazov agreed on the spot to take his place — his father took over services for him at his New York synagogue!

"We were very impressed when this rabbi (Niyazov) who is a rabbi of his own congregation, left New York to come here, because he felt so much effort was put in here," enthused Rabbi Feigelstock. "Since Rabbi Abramov was one of his students, he wanted to do it for him, too."

The Russian language High Holy Day services attracted more than 50 local Russians. The Rabbi took the opportunity of being in Vancouver to address and hold meetings with them and other community leaders to help identify some of their problems.

"They need a lot of help here," said Rabbi Niyazov, who spent many hours here compiling a guide in the Russian language to help begin the study of Jewish religious practice.

"He was up since 6 o'clock in the morning working on this," said Feigelstock.

Just as he tries to help in communities where people have not had access to teaching, Niyazov mentioned the work of *Ezras Achim* in the USSR.

Until recently this organization worked underground to provide books, clothes and religious artifacts. Today they can openly continue their work.

"Now there is no problem. They're sending mezuzot, siddurim, matzot. Everything is so expensive," said the Russian visitor. "Schools are opening in every community."

Feigelstock added, "They even send out rabbis as *shlichim* to help new communities get established.

"Nobody is doing such a

NIYAZOV — Page 8

NIYAZOV

From Page 7

wonderful job as *Ezras Achim*," said Rabbi Niyazov. "There are still more than two million Jews in the Soviet Union," he pointed out.

To find out more about the work of this organization, write to *Ezras Achim*, 688 Lefferts St., Brooklyn, New York.

Rabbi Niyazov invited the Jews of Vancouver to visit the Bokhari synagogue in New York if they are visiting the city.

The Rabbi and his wife are the parents of three children — two boys and a girl.

Reference page 251 for further details regarding this newspaper article

Part
FIVE

Chapter
SEVENTEEN

RABBI SHLOMO CHAI NIYAZOV

My ancestors lived in Samarkand for many generations. My maternal great-great-grandfather, Avraham Ulima, served as head of the *Beit Din* in Samarkand for over forty years. His family name (*oo'lima*) is a Bukharian word denoting great scholarship. All matters of religious life flowed through his capable hands. Everything he did bespoke holiness: each midnight, he would immerse in the *mikvah,* then stay awake studying the Zohar until dawn. The Muslim leaders of Samarkand had so much respect for him that they awarded him full judicial authority and the power to imprison (up to three days) anyone he deemed guilty.


Rav Avraham Ulima

His son Matisyahu personified his father's dedication, continuing the golden chain of rabbinical leadership. He too was awarded great respect by Muslim leaders. Many were those who came knocking on his door, seeking the benefit of his sagacity. Years later, when exiled by the Communists to Siberia, Matisyahu managed to establish a factory in Kurgan that supplied



Reb Abba Pliskin

the Russian army with necessities, and gained the grudging respect of the authorities for his business acumen. Although he eventually reached Eretz Yisrael, he died at the young age of forty-two.

My father Reb Dovid, of blessed memory, was born in the year 1929. Orphaned at the young age of eleven, my father was raised and educated by his uncle Reb Gavriel, who eventually became his father-in-law. However, Dovid's father (my grandfather) Dzura had already instilled in the boy a love for Torah, love for Jews, and *yiras shomayim*, fear of heaven. My father had the merit to learn under the Chabad Chassid Abba Pliskin – a colleague of Mendel Futerfas – who taught him in Yiddish! (So the language must have triggered something in him.)

I was born in Samarkand in the fall of 5714 (1953). My father Reb Dovid, of blessed memory, taught me, as did my grandfather Reb Gavriel, and others.

At the age of twelve, I stopped attending public school. Instead I studied with a group of boys under the tutelage of notable Chabad Chassidim: *Gemara* with Rabbi Moshe Lerner in Yiddish, and some Chassidus – also in Yiddish – with Rabbi Moshe Nisselevitch, who also *farbrenged* with us occasionally. Rabbi Binyomin Malachowski taught us *Gemara*, Tanya and *Chumash* in Yiddish. Rabbi Moshiach Chudaidatov reviewed with us *Gemara* and Tanya in Yiddish. In addition, we studied some subjects in Russian: *Gemara* and Chassidus from Rabbi Beryl Zaltzman; and Rabbi Hillel (Hilke) Zaltzman taught us *Derech Mitzvosecha*, the classic work by the Tzemach Tzedek, the third Lubavitcher Rebbe, in Russian as well.



Rabbi Moshe Lerner

We all studied secretly at the home of Gavriel Cohen Sayidov. Rabbi Binyomin Malachowski recalls how my father



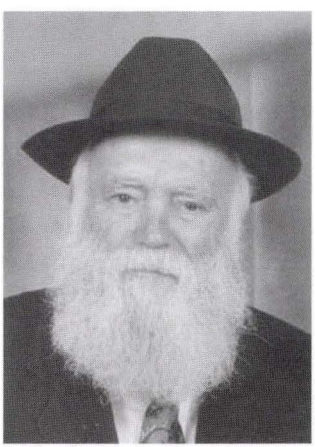
Reb Moshe Nisselevitch

brought young boys to an underground location of learning and a place where fellow Lubavitchers hung out. Rabbi Nisselevitch presided over these classes. While the Chassidim worried about arrest, my father conveyed total fearlessness, nurtured by Jewish pride that transcended any threats by authorities. Eventually we moved to the home of Motti Goldschmidt, again studying underground, and finally we studied at the home of Berke Schiff. In all, we learned secretly in three different houses.

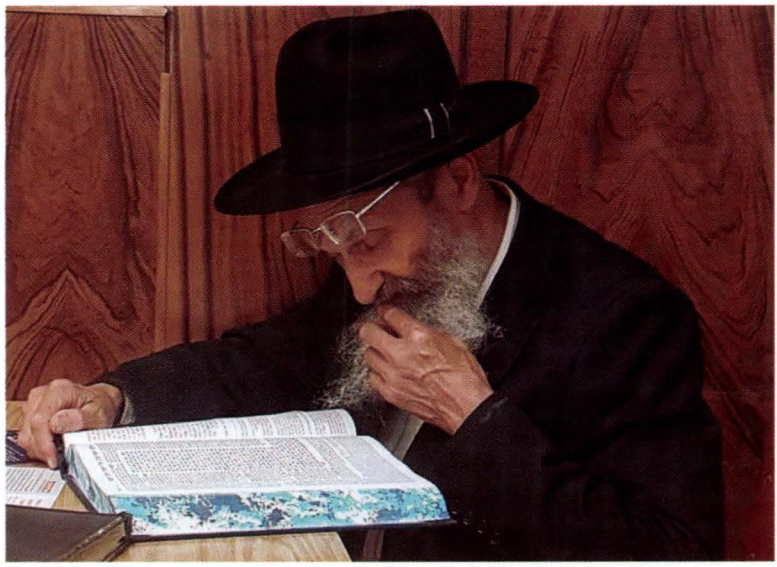
I was blessed with wonderful *chavrusas,* study partners: Nechemia Ladayov, Shimon Fasaikov, Yehuda Sayidov, Sion Gavrielov, and Emmanuel Ladayov. After learning a whole day we all spread out into other homes to teach others in the evening. This authentic Torah education gave me a solid foundation for life and would later serve me in good stead.

Learning a Trade

After completing school, I was encouraged by Reb Moshe Nisselevitch to travel to Tashkent to learn the laws of *safrut,* scribal arts. I objected, saying that I wanted to stay in Samarkand and learn how to become a *shochet.* Part of my resistance had to do with the fact that my friends were staying in Samarkand to learn *shechita.* Five students had been chosen by the school administration for their diligence – Yehuda Aryeh Sayidov, Emmanuel Ladayov, Ariel Aviyov, Shimon



Reb Gavriel Cohen Sayidov



Reb Yosef Neimark

Fuzaylov, and me. Four were to remain and I was to be scooted off.

"Learning *safrut* is something expected of people on a higher spiritual level," Rabbi Nisselevitch countered. "Just look at the difference. We have a certain level of trust in a *sofer;* we allow him to do his craft in the privacy of his home or office. The kosher slaughter of animals, however, is mostly done while others are watching."

After hearing him present it that way, I reluctantly agreed. Off I went to Tashkent. I was barely seventeen.

I was given the address of Reb Chaim Zalman Pewzner (Bober), a Chabad Chassid living in Tashkent. His grandson, Reb Yosef Neimark, taught me how to become a *sofer.* It certainly required rigorous training and great skill. The hardest part was not necessarily the writing – those with a flair for calligraphy would find it easier – rather, remembering the hundreds of laws pertaining to the writing of Torah scrolls, *tefillin,* and *mezuzot.*

Yosef taught me all the laws. He also trained me in preparing the quill and special ink used for the writing. I was not alone: the two sons of Reb Mendel Garelick studied alongside me.



Author at 3 years old

I managed to learn that a perfect quill that could produce sharp, fine lines is crucial to a *sofer*'s success. Therefore, crafting such a quill took on great importance. The quill enabled the *sofer* to merely press with limited pressure in order to create vivid lettering.

Ink, too, presented an intense labor unto itself. Some of the standard ingredients included water, gum a'c, logwood, and copper sulfate, but there are many recipes for this ink – even more laws to master! I knew that quality ink is the main reason a Torah can last a very long time, so I applied myself to this craft as well, never resorting to shortcuts. Sewing with the sinews, and all the applicable laws, were also quickly mastered.

Within a month, grounded in the necessary material, I returned home to find that my friends – the group of students learning *shechita* – had barely made any headway! I approached them and asked to join the group; they agreed. This way, I mastered both the laws of *safrut* and *shechita*.

One of the main *shochtim* in Samarkand was a pious Bukharian Jew by the name of Mullah Yosef Eliav, one of Rabbi Eliezrov's prize disciples. He, along with the esteemed Rabbis Chaim Zalman (ChaZaK) Kozliner, Michoel Goldschmidt, and Yaakov Broshanski, tested us on the laws of ritual slaughter. The questions were exceedingly difficult – these rabbis would not tolerate any shortcuts – so we were justifiably elated when they ordained us with *Kabala*.



Reb Chaim Zalman Pewzner

In the Bukharian community, Mullah Yosef was widely regarded as one of the most prominent Chassidim. He had the spiritual countenance that caused people to stop and stare. Like many of his brethren,



Rabbi Chaim Schneur Zalman (ChaZaK) Kozliner

he had been arrested and sentenced to twenty years' exile for religious activities, only to be released after Stalin's death. Years of suffering were visibly etched onto a face dominated by a very high forehead. His deep-set eyes radiated pain and conviction.

Many a story circulated about Mullah Yosef's devotion to Rabbi Eliezrov. Mullah Yosef was once instructed by his mentor to supervise the kashrut standards of a local butcher shop whose owner was suspect. After a while, the butcher, fed up with the stringency of the rabbi and his *mashgiach,* supervisor, lost his temper when he noticed Mullah Yosef staring glumly at the innards of yet another freshly slaughtered animal

"Your over-strictness has caused me so many unnecessary losses," he exclaimed. "Don't tell me *this* animal is also *treif.* Just let me sell it and recoup some of my losses!"

Mullah recoiled in shock. "You want me to be silent?" He ran outside the store and began shouting at the top of his lungs, *Not kosher! Not kosher!* A crowd gathered, listening to Mullah Yosef relate what had just transpired in the supposedly kosher butcher shop.

In a rage the butcher closed his shop. He hired an Uzbek to kill Mullah Yosef. The next day, at the appointed hour, the hitman returned to meet with the butcher.

"Did you kill the rabbi?" the butcher demanded.

"Impossible!" cried the gangster. "Early this morning, as I hid along the path where he walks every morning to the slaughterhouse, I saw a pillar of fire rise heavenward above his head!"

He handed a billfold to the butcher. "Here! Take your money back. You paid me to kill a human being; I cannot kill an angel."



Rabbi Yaakov Broshanski

Immediately after his release from gulag, Mullah Yosef wanted to resume working as a *shochet*, but feared that his time behind bars had marred his ability to slaughter with sure, steady hands. He therefore approached Boruch Duchman, a local Chassidic *shochet*, with an unusual request.

"I want you to examine my abilities at *shechita*," he said. "Check if I can sharpen my knife correctly. If I do, grant me ordination again."

Reb Boruch was held in such high regard that the most pious Jews in Bukhara relied on his *shechita* only. Butchers often came knocking at his door in the middle of the night, waking him and asking him to come and slaughter an animal for them. In view of this expertise, it was no surprise that Mullah Yosef felt the need to pass Reb Boruch's standards.

Keenly aware of Mullah Yosef's saintliness, Reb Boruch stammered in protest, "No one doubts your proficiency!"

But Mullah Yosef could not be swayed. "If you will not test me," he threatened, "I will never *shecht* again!"

Conceding defeat, Reb Boruch instructed Mullah Yosef to prepare his *shechita* knife – to flatten all its nicks and irregularities.

"Well done!" Reb Boruch cried, upon inspection. "I will immediately confer ordination upon you again."

Later, when preparing his escape from Samarkand, Reb Boruch stipulated clearly that anyone could eat from Mullah Yosef's *shechita* without qualms. It was then that we could see the unique humility of this venerated *shochet*. No matter who asked to inspect his knife – even a teenage boy – Mullah Yosef handed it over, waiting modestly as if *he* were the youngster being inspected. There was no indignation, no resentment – just utter submissiveness to the requirements of *halacha*. Whoever saw this scene could not help but feel in awe.

Conscription Woes

When I was seventeen and a half, we began to fret over impending conscription. Every able-bodied man was required to serve in the army on his eighteenth birthday. There was good reason we avoided it: immediately after conscription, boys were subjected to humiliation – Jewish soldiers received an extra dose of beatings – and there was no way to keep kosher, Shabbos, or any of the other mitzvoth. Nevertheless, for avoiding the draft there were serious consequences.

I found myself in a dilemma. Then Rachamim Chudaidatov, a close family friend, made the following suggestion: "Let's prepare a bogus story. Go to the hospital and say that your stomach hurts. In this way, you'll get an exemption. So when they come to get you at eighteen, you'll have an excuse. Just show them the paper and say you're sick."

So my family summoned an ambulance, which took me to the hospital for tests. In the meantime, behind the scenes, doctors were bribed to write a letter that I suffered an ulcer and to recommend natural healing at the hot springs.

The doctor went through the motions of examining me, and even had me x-rayed. He declared, "We need to operate. However, I see that you ate."

"No I didn't!" I insisted, using reverse psychology to convince the doctor of my sincerity. "I'm ready for the operation."

"Yes, you did eat," the doctor replied, firmly. "We cannot operate." Then he left.



Reb Boruch Duchman

I realized that this was the doctor my mother had bribed. He returned with a "sick" letter and I was able to come home after a few weeks. While at the hospital I befriended another patient, a Jewish gentleman named Mr. Kahanov, who spoke about his three sons. Seeing their need for Jewish education, I offered to teach them, which I later did.

Exemption letter in hand, I thought I could relax. Nevertheless, we began to notice an ever-widening net of surveillance around our family. Thanks to an informer, the government monitored our every move, and a draft notice came for me, scheduled for the first week of Av.

I tried pleading that I was too weak, and even showed them the exemption letter, but the authorities insisted that I report to the nearest recruitment station.

"The army has medics to examine you," they said. "They will decide whether or not you are fit to serve." The government did not trust the regular hospital.



Bukharian Jews praying by Kotel on the 9th of Av

When my conscription notice arrived in the mail, my mother panicked.

"Look!" she cried. "He is slated to appear during the Nine Days – the worst possible time of the year." She was referring to the beginning of the month of Av, culminating in the ninth day – Tisha B'Av – an intense period of mourning and fasting for the destruction of our Holy Temple in Jerusalem and the many other calamities in Jewish history.

She marched to the conscription office, bringing proof that one of my uncles had recently passed away, and she asked them for an extension. "The family is still in mourning," she explained. "Let my son stay home for a few more days."

Her request was granted: I appeared at the examination office on the new date of my second draft notice – the day after Tisha B'Av. Immediately I was sent to the nearest army hospital for medical examination, which was expected to take a few weeks. I should have worried about finding a way to feign another illness. Instead, I tried to find a way to escape the hospital for Shabbos – especially since I was the *ba'al korah,* the one leading our minyan's Torah reading.

After scrutinizing my surroundings, I found a surprising opening – something that could only happen in a Russian hospital. Unbeknown to the supervisors, every day the patients dressed a volunteer in civilian clothing and helped him climb over a brick wall and escape to the local market, in order to bring back a bottle of vodka. I befriended the person in charge, asking to be chosen to go on Saturday and promising to bring back a bottle on Sunday. Imagine my joy when he readily agreed.

On Shabbos morning, I donned the civilian clothing, courtesy of the renegade hospital patients, and ran . . . straight to shul! It was of utmost importance to keep a low profile; woe to me were the army to hear of this escapade! Therefore, arriving in shul, I tried to blend in with the others, but the *gabbai* singled me out. He noticed the bell-bottoms.

"What's with you today, Shlomo?" he announced. "Why the modern clothing? Have you become a dandy?"

I smiled in embarrassment. "Yes." And I shrugged. "Today, I'm in vogue."

That afternoon I returned to the hospital where, thank G-d, no one had noticed my absence. My mother arrived on Sunday with the promised bottle of vodka and additional goodies for my roommates, but one of the hospital guards watched me carrying the bag and asked suspiciously, "What do you have there?"

I had to think fast. If I told the truth, I would be severely punished. If I told a lie, there was a chance I would be spared.

Nevertheless, I decided to tell the truth. "Vodka and a chaser."

This sounded so ludicrous that the guard roared with laughter and let me go.

Another "adventure" during my stay at the army hospital involved the problem of work on Shabbos, which I was determined not to desecrate. Each day a different person was assigned to do different chores among the many rooms in the hospital building.

One Shabbos, it was my turn to mop the floor. Instead I went into hiding.

When the Sabbath was ended, I emerged from my hiding place. To my amazement, the floor was spotless. I looked around and caught sight of another patient, a non-Jew I had befriended, who was holding a mop.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

I apologized and said, "Thanks for doing this for me. Perhaps I can help you with *your* chore on Sunday."

There was another Gentile patient who introduced himself to me. When I said, "I am a Jew," he exclaimed, "It can't be! I hate all Jews. They are despicable – but you! You are so nice."

I smiled modestly at him. "Jews are nice; but there are so many haters." We became friends and he changed his outlook on my people.

Keeping the mitzvoth, not only Shabbos, was difficult in the hospital, and I relied on a certain subterfuge. To my luck, the hospital lobby had a mini-mart, similar to a snack shop in American hospitals for visitors, with a front that was open to the street.

It was there that I sneaked in to *daven*. It turned out that the mart was owned by a Jew. Thanks to his help, and huge bribes, my family had the staff declare me unfit for military service.

My parents and siblings rejoiced when I returned home with the army exemption document in hand. However, those who had informed on us in the past remained determined to punish us for promoting Yiddishkeit. Soon, I received another draft notice.

Until today, I have no idea how I had the audacity to do what I did next. I took that notice and marched right back to the conscription office.

"This is illegal?" I exclaimed. "Just two months ago I was granted a waiver! Now you tell me to come back? The law provides for a six-month minimum between appearances."

The confrontation worked. The officers apologized for the "oversight," and I returned home again – only to face an unpleasant surprise. While I had been protesting at the office, a



Several talmidim of Rabbi Niyazov in Samarkand.
Right to left: Rachamin Niyazov, Uriel Mirzakandov, Yair Niyazov,
Rachmin Yusupov, Roshel Mirzakandov, Rafik Yusupov

notice had been delivered to our home, ordering my brother Rachamin to appear the next morning at the same draft center. My frantic parents used all their connections to get his conscription delayed, but they were informed that orders had arrived from Moscow, insisting he be drafted immediately.

Our offer to pay ten times the regular "going rate" of bribery – three thousand rubles instead of three hundred – fell on deaf ears. Everyone was too frightened to help us.

"They are going to come for him tonight regardless," we were told. "Just do as the notice says."

Things looked bleak. My parents briefly entertained the notion of having Rachamin flee the city, but we knew all too well that such a move would intensify governmental wrath against our family.

The pounding on our door began precisely at midnight. We lay in our beds completely still, hoping against hope that the police would decide to leave us alone.

The pounding intensified. Within minutes, soldiers broke down our front door and entered our house, while leaving some officers to stand guard outside. They dragged our watchdog into the basement, and slammed the trapdoor shut as they tried to minimize the crazed barking that had woken the neighborhood.

I had disconnected the electricity in our house to make the soldiers' job harder, but they immediately reconnected the current and began searching for Rachamin. We had prepared him well: a table piled high with medicines stood near his bed while he sweated under layers of heavy quilts.

"Can't you see he's sick?" my mother screamed. "Come back when he gets better."

The soldiers ignored her. They cast off the quilts and dragged Rachamin out of bed.

But then the officer in charge had a change of heart. "Call an ambulance," he ordered.

By now, everyone on our block was wide awake and quaking in fear. When the ambulance arrived, a physician entered our home and began to examine Rachamin.

"Just let us take him!" the officer spat. "This Jew is perfectly healthy; he's just faking illness to get out of the army."

Then a miracle occurred.

The physician turned to the officer. "I'm the only one with the authority to pronounce him well or unwell," she said coolly. "You have no right to decide."

She turned back to Rachamin and continued checking his vital organs, nodding to herself as she poked and prodded. "Yes, yes, this is inflamed, and that is inflamed as well. You really are unwell! We will take you to the hospital."

The medics brought in a stretcher and carried Rachamin into the ambulance. My mother asked to accompany him, but the medics barred her entry. "Absolutely not!" snapped the physician. "He is in our care and it is already one o'clock in the morning. You can visit him tomorrow."

That night, we did not sleep. I hurried to one of our contacts who had influence in that particular hospital; he quickly returned with the news that Rachamin had been denied admission – his paperwork was not in order – and therefore released back to the army. My parents, devastated at the news, immediately hired a car to take them to the recruitment station.

As they entered, the voice of an officer blared over the loudspeaker: "Your son has missed his 1:00 AM train ride to the army base. He was supposed to be drafted to help place railroad tracks across Siberia. However, now that he has missed the train, it is your responsibility to ensure that he reaches his destination. If he does not show up within ten days, his file will be transferred to a military tribunal for punishment."

My dumbfounded parents glared at the officer in disgust. Even under the best of circumstances, Siberia was a nine-day journey by train. How could Rachamin get there in ten? Nevertheless, they left the recruitment center with gladdened hearts: Rachamin was still with us! Perhaps there was still a way to defer his conscription.

On the way home, Rachamin filled us in about his experiences. A black police car and a military vehicle had trailed the

ambulance all the way to the hospital. "Suddenly," he described, "the police car overtook the ambulance, swerved across the road, and blocked us. When the ambulance stopped, officers exited the car and began arguing with the physician, ordering her to let me out of the ambulance and into their vehicle, but she refused to budge. In the end, they had to let us pass through."

He continued, "When we got to the hospital, they found that I did not have the correct paperwork to process my admission. The soldiers pushed me into their vehicle and sped to the recruitment center, but the train had already left, so they made me sit there under heavy guard until you arrived."

Back at home, my parents left no stone unturned to secure Rachamin's deferment. It cost them over a thousand rubles, but finally they were in possession of a document postponing his conscription for six months.

But the government still did not give up.

A short while later, while I was in Moscow to purchase the *arba minim,* the Four Species for Sukkot, a military vehicle pulled up outside our house and took my other brother, Yair, to the conscription office. He was processed, placed under guard, and ordered to take a shower and change into military uniform. By a stroke of Divine Providence, someone called out to the guard, and Yair made the daring decision to flee and hide in the home of a dear friend.

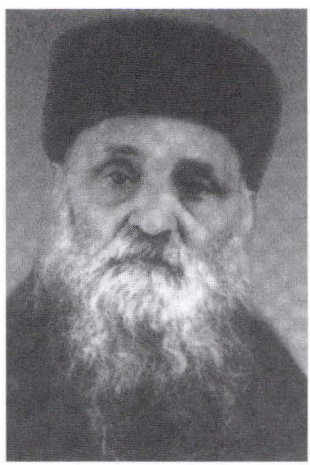
Meanwhile, my parents had decided to ask the advice of this particular friend. Imagine their shock when they walked inside and found Yair grinning at them! After an emotional embrace, they got to work on securing a deferment for him as well.

In this way, we were all spared the tribulation of the Russian army. We did not have to defile our mouths with non-kosher food, nor our souls by working on Shabbos. Instead, we found employment at a factory that labeled appliances, sparing us the need to violate the Day of Rest. For this achievement I give my mother – Rebbetzin Rivka – the credit: she had sold all her jewelry, enabling our family to raise the exorbitant fees for all the necessary bribes.

Nothing to Fear

My mother had many other merits to her name. She allowed Chassidim to build a secret women's *mikvah* under the floorboards of her kitchen. My mother knew full well that, G-d forbid, were this *mikvah* ever discovered by government officials, there was no way she could feign ignorance. Despite this, she allowed the *mikvah* to operate, and even enlisted the help of my eight-year-old sister Tzivia as well! Tzivia would walk the women home after they used the *mikvah,* doing her part to make their visits to our home look like simple social calls. In this way, all members of our family were recruited in the fight to maintain Yiddishkeit in the face of Soviet repression.

The *mikvah* remained central to Jewish life in Samarkand. Generations earlier, Rabbi Eliezrov had invested great effort in ensuring the construction of clean, modern *mikvaot* staffed by dedicated women who kept them hot and crystal clear. Interestingly, the sanctity of immersion became known to Gentile women in Bukhara as well, and they sometimes asked for permission to immerse. "We would like to purify ourselves, as you do, to be ready for Moshiach," they said. (For some, this became a first step in their interest in Yiddishkeit – leading later to conversion. These converts later made the difficult journey to Eretz Yisrael.)



Reb Eliya Levine

Many other people used the underground *mikvah* in our house. I have fond memories of the Okunov brothers – Meir, Hershel and Mendel visiting our home to use the *mikvah.*

Reb Eliya Levine, a Chassid of great repute, was especially active in the maintenance and construction of *mikvaot.* His work became extremely dangerous during the dark years of Communist oppression; he knew firsthand of others

who had been arrested, or murdered, for doing exactly what he was doing. Nevertheless, he was indefatigable. We all revered him for his sagacity and halachic rulings, but his communal involvement in *mikvaot* surpassed all expectation.

Additional Skills

Apparently, my own mastery of these two complicated religious skills – *shechita* and *safrut* – were not enough for a special Chassid by the name of Dovid Geisinsky. He insisted I train to become a *mohel* as well. Thanks to his dedication, and the tremendous amount of time and effort he invested, I eventually became a *mohel*. Reb Dovid had the foresight to realize how critical these religious skills would become in the face of relentless persecution against Jews in possession of these skills.

After I had mastered the art of *safrut,* Reb Dovid gave me fifteen *Sifrei Torah* to repair. Originally he had collected thirty, but half had been smuggled out of the country. Years later, I took charge of eight of the remaining scrolls. (In an interesting case, I found different halves of two Torahs to be kosher, so I joined the halves – creating a complete scroll!)



Left to right: Rabbis Meir, Hershel and Mendel Okunov



Reb Dovid Geisinsky

Reb Dovid then gave me a gift: a *Sefer Torah* measuring less than ten inches tall.

"This Torah was used during the war," he explained. "People couldn't carry heavy items while escaping, so they fashioned a tiny Torah to take with them."

(Later, when I was able to immigrate to America, I took this small Torah with me to New York, where it was restored to perfect condition. It is currently stored in an Ark with other *Sifrei Torah* belonging to my synagogue, L'Maan Achai Bukharim.)

Despite our differences in age, I became good friends with Reb Dovid. Blessed with a prodigious memory and sharp wit, he always enjoyed a clever idea or a complicated puzzle. I remember he once showed me a mathematical riddle he had found in a *sefer* of explanations on the Book of Psalms. In later years, I repeated this riddle often, always giving Reb Dovid the credit for its publicity. Everyone found its mathematical solution appealing. The riddle, which is mentioned in *Sefer Toldos Gedolei Yisrael* – History of the Torah Giants (Kormali), went like this:

> *Two men were having a meal. The first man brought three loaves of bread, and the second brought two. A third man joined them. Together they ate all five loaves.*
>
> *As he left, the third man placed five coins on the table as payment. The first man wanted to take three coins and give his partner two, but the latter refused. "We must divide it equally," he said. "I deserve half of the coins, because he gave us the coins to divide."*
>
> *They went to the local rabbi, who advised the person who had brought the three loaves to take four coins, and the other to take merely one. Unhappy with this verdict, they decided to go to a renowned Sage (some say it was the Torah commentator Ibn Ezra) and ask him to solve their dilemma.*

After they explained what had transpired with the local rabbi, the Sage confirmed that the rabbi had been correct.

Why was this actually fair? The Sage explained:

"The men who gave the loaves had also eaten. We can reasonably divide each of the five loaves into three, totaling fifteen slices. This meant that their actual contribution totaled the following measure.

"The first person had provided nine slices, of which he ate five – leaving four remaining. He deserves four coins."

The Sage turned to the second person. "You, on the other hand, contributed six slices, of which you ate five – leaving you with one coin."

Reb Dovid passed away at the age of seventy-six. It was on a Shabbos afternoon: he had just washed his hands to eat *seudas shlishis*, the third meal, and was in the middle of reciting the blessing of *Hamotzi*. I feel fortunate to have been the *mohel* for the grandson of this great man, named after the grandfather who had taught me the skill of *bris milah*.

In a clear stroke of Divine Providence, this *bris* led to another. After performing the *bris* for Reb Dovid's grandson in Tashkent, I flew back home to Samarkand. During the hour-long flight, a friend met me and asked if I could accompany him in three days to help him deliver a *get*, a bill of divorce. I agreed.



Left to right: Yair Niyazov, Emmanuel Shimonov, Rachamin Niyazov, unknown, Yochai Yagudaev and Robert Yagudaev

Three days later, I boarded the plane again with my friend.

"Listen," I said, "do me a favor. Since we'll be in Tashkent anyway, let's make a stop so I can check the child I circumcised three days ago."

He stared at me in surprise. "You? You know how to make a *bris*?"

"Yes. Why?"

"My daughter-in-law is having a baby soon. If it's a boy, we will ask you to make the *bris*."

I immediately agreed. They had a boy, and I performed the *bris*.

Now, the custom usually is that a *mohel* performs the *bris* on his own children first; however, in my case, I became a *mohel* before I was married, so I did *brissim* on other people's children, and did not wait for the birth of my sons.

It all began this way: One day, when I was twenty years old and still single, I bumped into an old acquaintance on the street. "You owe me a *mazal tov*!" said my friend excitedly, "I had a grandson!"

"Why didn't you ask me to make the *bris*?" I said.

"You can make a *bris*? Are you married?"



Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov with his father Rabbi David Niyazov

"No."

"Have you made a *bris* before?"

I gave a noncommittal answer. "If so," said my friend, "please, I ask you now to come make the *bris* for my grandson."

When the day of the *bris* arrived, I asked Rabbi Daniel Shakarov, another *mohel* and local *rav*, to come along and stand next to me, so that I had help in case I needed it. He also lent me his utensils to use. When the father saw Rabbi Shakarov arriving with me, he said, "Can you do the *bris*? You are here anyway."

My heart sank. Here was my chance to finally perform a real *bris*, and it was being snatched away before my eyes. To my surprise, Rabbi Shakarov turned to the father and said, "Why do you say that? Rabbi Niyazov is here and he will do a great job. In fact, I take responsibility for his work."

The *bris* went well, thank G-d, and afterwards the father gave me ten rubles, but, in gratitude towards Rabbi Shakarov for his moral support, I gave him the money instead. From then on, people began contacting me to serve as a *mohel*.

In the end, while it is certainly true that people have more trust in a *mohel* who has circumcised his own children, in my case I was fortunate to gain trust quickly so that I was able to perform many *brissim* even as a *bochur*. Later, I was fortunate to do many *brissim* including my sons, my nephews, and, with time, even my grandsons.

Ever-Widening Efforts

The Jewish community of Samarkand greatly benefited from its highly organized infrastructure. In addition to Chamah a special fund, Ozer Dalim, helped the needy. Each year, before Pesach, the fund sent wine, food, and matzoth to many struggling families. Obtaining matzah became an annual headache: because Samarkand lacked an independent matzah factory, we instead had to order large amounts of machine-made matzah from Tashkent.

We, together with other local Chassidim, were extra scrupulous to eat only matzah *shmurah*, hand-made matzah. Three



Rabbi Niyazov leading the Azkara (a yahrzeit gathering)

weeks before Pesach, we traveled to the rolling fields to harvest the wheat and store them in exclusive centers maintained to keep the wheat dry until Pesach. This was the only wheat we used. Two weeks before Pesach, we set up special ovens and baked matzah for the community.

Many Lubavitcher families relied on us for these special hand-made matzoth. My father and I bought train tickets to deliver these special matzoth to Tashkent. This meant a seven-hour trip to the Uzbek capital. After we completed the delivery we procured many boxes of machine-made matzha for the Jews in Samarkand.

My father then remembered, he was committed to attend an "Azkara" – a yahrzeit gathering for a prominent community member – on this very same day that he had promised to bring matzoth to over twenty families scattered in Tashkent.

(There were many occasions when my father would send one of his students, Eliyahu Akilov, to the Azkaras. Eliyahu's son, Binyamin, had mentioned to me several times how his father was so surprised hearing novel Torah thoughts, especially given

the scarcity of books. My father's Torah thoughts provided Eliyahu with new material to repeat at these events.)

There was no way my father could not appear at the Azkara, usually a lavish gathering replete with speeches, prayers, and a full meal. So we purchased tickets for a flight from Tashkent to Samarkand, lugging our boxes to the airport, only to be stopped by a border officer.

"What's in those boxes?" he asked suspiciously.

"Nothing special," my father replied. "Just flatbread, baked without salt or spices."

The officer smiled, stamped our papers, and waved us onto the plane. The flight was pleasant and short. Landing at the airport in Samarkand, we prepared to pass through customs again with the remaining boxes.

This time, however, the customs officer did not accept our explanation and summoned the police.

What to do? Leave the boxes and come emptyhanded? This would invite even more trouble. We stood there, nervous and sweating, as a police officer approached us.

"How much do you want from us to settle this quickly?" my father asked him.

"One hundred rubles."

My father gave him all the money he had – thirty rubles. The officer glanced at the notes quickly before shoving them into his pockets. "Next time you pay me the rest," he said, waving us through. With the help of Hashem, the matzoth were saved and we arrived in time for the Azkara, where my father served as the main speaker.



Eliyahu, the son of Reuven Akilov

The next year, we decided not to relive the ordeal of transporting matzah by airplane. We phoned our contacts in Tashkent, asking them to ship the matzoth by truck and have them delivered to our address. Several days went by and we began to worry. Our fears intensified upon calling our contacts and finding out – the

matzoth had left long ago with enough time to reach Samarkand! Something must have happened to the transport.

Another day passed. Then another. Then came the news: the police had stopped our truck and confiscated all the matzoth.

Now we really panicked! Pesach was soon upon us, and we had lost all the *shmura* matzah designated for the entire city. My father immediately bribed his contacts at police headquarters, who commandeered a car. We sped down the highway to Tashkent, stopping off at every police station on the way and asking for the whereabouts of the missing matzah.

Nothing worked. The matzoth had vanished. My father and his police friends became suspicious about the entire story, but there was no time for investigations – Pesach was coming! Left with no choice, we paid again for the same amount of matzoth and for a private truck to ship them to Samarkand.

Later, after Pesach, my father investigated the mystery of the missing matzah. It took a short time for the Gentile truck driver involved to break down and confess: he had sold the shipment for a bargain price to several Jews along the way. Although we were happy that at least the matzah ended up in Jewish hands, this episode certainly taught us a lesson: never again trust the transport of precious cargo to non-Jews.

"Father of Russian Jewry"

Then there were unpleasant issues forced upon us by the fragilities of life – the complicated laws of *gittin,* Jewish divorce. The bickering that went on during the *get* process always bothered me. Nevertheless, I remained keenly aware that by writing the *get* I was enabling husband and wife to separate their lives in accordance with *halacha.*

Despite the cost to my personal wellbeing, I became increasingly involved in helping women receive their *gittin* from recalcitrant husbands. Thankfully I had helped over thirty women, including some who had become swept up in highly fractious situations. I begged, argued, shouted, flattered – anything necessary to achieve my goal.

Some unscrupulous husbands were ready to pay for a forged *get* before running off to Eretz Yisrael or some other country, where they tried to remarry under Jewish law. Despite the remoteness of our location, and the near impossibility of outside communication, worthy and dedicated rabbis steadfastly opposed this trend.

Rabbi Yitzchak Zilber (Kazaneski), in particular, sent us a steady stream of letters, filled with all sorts of detailed information, in order to verify the *gittin* coming from Bukhara. He always volunteered to serve as legal emissary to redeliver or reaccept a *get* on behalf of a spouse left behind in Bukhara. Rabbi Zilber also helped Russian women receive a *get* after abandonment by inventing all sorts of tricks to find lost husbands and persuade them to grant a Jewish divorce. His intervention saved many families from unfortunate legal complications that would have cast a long shadow on future generations.

Born in Kazan, Russia, this esteemed rabbi and scholar served years of heavy labor in Stalin's gulags. Even under those circumstances, he taught Torah to other Jewish prisoners. Later, after receiving amnesty upon Stalin's death, Rabbi Zilber was exploited by the KGB in a cover story about the suffering of children under the care of a religiously fanatical parent. The KGB went so far as to attempt to take his children away, promising his wife an apartment (highly coveted in the USSR) if she agreed to a divorce! Rabbi Zilber fled to Tashkent and was finally able to emigrate to Eretz Yisrael in 1972, after many years of being denied permission.



Rabbi Yitzchak Zilber (Kazaneski)

Once there, Rabbi Zilber faced a rude awakening: the vast majority of Russian-speaking Jews in Eretz Yisrael were completely

ignorant of their tradition. He undertook rectification by teaching extensively throughout the country. His home was open to anyone seeking his advice, it earned him the informal title "Father of Russian Jewry."

Broken Hearts

The year was 1956. Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Communist Party, had taken the unprecedented step of denouncing Stalin's purges in an attempt to usher in an era aimed to better the lives of ordinary citizens. However, this step was largely ineffective when it came to religious persecution. True, hasty executions were halted, but up until the 1970s, when I came of age, Jews continued to suffer in the hands of the Soviet police – arrests, interrogations, imprisonment, and exile.

The Chassidic *farbrengen* was a welcome respite from our daily worries, an oasis of spirituality in a desert of religious oppression. These *farbrengens* gave us the impetus to keep going and never give up. We were few in number and resources – no match for the superior Soviet forces – but the *farbrengens* never failed to recharge us, enabling us to continue the Rebbe's work.

During those years, various Chassidim of stature became the de facto leaders of these *farbrengens*. Some spoke with words that came from broken hearts, in voices wavering on the verge of tears. Others spoke with the joy of conviction. No matter the speaker or style, the message remained crystal clear: We were entrusted with the sacred mission of keeping the flame of Yiddishkeit alive, despite the perilous circumstances. I would go so far as to say that, if not for these *farbrengens*, we would not have been able to persist.

My favorite Chassidic melody at these gatherings had these Yiddish lyrics:

Der Eybershter vert gaiben,	דער אייבישטער וועט געבן
Gezunt und leben,	געזונט און לעבן
Vellen mir faren	וועלן מיר פארן
Tzum Rebben.	צום רעבין

May G-d grant us
Health and Life,
So that we may once again
See our Rebbe.

This melody was sung with great longing to be reunited with our beloved Rebbe. These *farbrengens* became extra joyous when vodka or *mezonos,* pastry, managed to make its way from the Rebbe's table in New York all the way to us, Chassidim in Samarkand.

Many people attended such gatherings. We crumbled the piece of pastry from the Rebbe into the batter of a much larger cake, which was baked with the crumbs. This way, everyone was able to share some of "the Rebbe's cake."

Yet, we felt the greatest joy when we merited to receive an answer from the Rebbe. Getting messages past the Soviet censors in those days was no small feat. Our letters to the Rebbe were couched in allusions, then mailed to a different country – whence they were delivered to the Rebbe's address at 770 Eastern Parkway. His replies reached us via similar channels. As increasing numbers of Chassidim received their exit visas, our home became the "clearinghouse" for the Rebbe's messages, which made their way to their intended recipient.

On a personal note, I remember an answer of the Rebbe pertinent to my family situation. After years of toil, bribes, tears, and prayers, my family managed to receive our much-awaited exit visas. Yet a serious problem marred our joy: our sister, Tovik, had applied for an exit visa independently. Therefore, she did not receive a visa along with ours.

We were then faced with a dilemma: Should we seize the opportunity to flee Soviet oppression? Or should we protect our sister and stay behind? If we did stay, would we ever have a second chance to leave?

Complicating matters, we had found a buyer for our house, who kept insisting that we finalize the sale. That money was badly needed to pay off the rest of the fees associated with our visas. Under these circumstances, every day brought additional stress.

Using hints and clues, we wrote of our predicament to the Rebbe. Meanwhile, we continued to pay additional bribes to extend the dates of our visas – but no reply came from the Rebbe.

Three months went by. One night, we awoke to pounding on our door. What could it be now? Perhaps an informer notified the government that three of the four boys in our family had avoided conscription?

No, it was an official who came to notify us of a worrisome order just received from higher authorities: either the Niyazov family use the visas to depart immediately, or else the visas would be cancelled.

This ultimatum threw us into a panic. Nevertheless, we would not make any decision to leave without the Rebbe's tacit approval.

"We are staying," we told the officer. "Cancel the visas."

The very next day, an answer arrived from the Rebbe: *Delay your journey temporarily.* Great was our joy and relief at having come to the same decision.

We stayed in Samarkand for an additional five years. Throughout this time, I married and had two boys, and the rest of my family continued bolstering the standards of local Yiddishkeit, working as *mohelim, shochtim,* and *sofrim.*

Chapter
EIGHTEEN

KEEPING THE FLAME

The crown jewel of our efforts in the Soviet Union remained the most difficult: providing young children with a Torah education. We tried our best to broaden the number of children already studying in our clandestine Talmud Torah network. Every move we made became burdened by a host of problems – finding teachers and safe houses where the children could study, raising money to pay the teachers, bribing officials to turn a blind eye to our activities. A large part of our time went toward coaching these young children what to say in case they were ever questioned by the police to avoid entrapment.

To their eternal credit, there were some elderly Jews who made their homes available to our *chadorim*. "Take my house and teach the youngsters," they whispered to me. "Otherwise, the next generation will grow up completely ignorant of their heritage. What's the point of living such a life?"

Sometimes I would simply walk the streets and approach Jewish children, encouraging them to follow me to a secret location, where I taught them *alef-beit*. Many returned later for additional lessons. (When I later immigrated to the United States, adults would stop me and introduce themselves as the children

I had accosted on the streets of Samarkand.) The Rebbe, who knew best the dangers we faced, continued sending us messages of encouragement to expand our educational efforts among the youth.

One day, I realized that we were short of a teacher. Obviously we needed someone we could trust implicitly. I went to speak with Yaakov Levayov, an accomplished dentist who meticulously kept the laws in *Shulchan Aruch.* His practice was part of a much wider company; he ate only kosher in the workplace and refused to work on Shabbos. I had thought this a farfetched gamble: why would a busy professional leave his business to teach Torah to young children? But Yaakov listened carefully to our proposition and immediately agreed to join the *cheder.* He met with his manager, who agreed to let Yaakov leave the workplace if he found a dentist to replace him.

After a few days, Yaakov found another Jewish dentist. Obviously this new worker did not keep Shabbos or *kashrut.* When Yaakov met with the manager the following week to receive a letter of recommendation, he was met with a wall of resistance.



(left) Reb Binyomin Niyazov with Reb Yaakov Levayov (right)

"Why did you tell me that Jews can't come to work on Saturdays?" the manager fumed. "Your replacement is Jewish, and he works on Saturdays. You've been tricking me all this time to enjoy extra vacation! Who knows? Probably you are leaving to join those accursed Zionists!"

Spittle flying from his lips, the manager continued hurling curses and accusations. "Liar! Thief! Not only will I not write you a letter of recommendation, I will sue you for damages! You love the Zionists more than you love our country!" Other dentists on that floor had to run out of their offices to restrain the manager from physical assault.

Yaakov went home, shaken and fearful of the consequences. Nevertheless, his father dismissed his worries.

"How fortunate you are to have left your job in order to teach young children Torah," he told Yaakov. "Remember – you are doing precisely what the Rebbe had asked us to do. You have nothing to fear."

The very next day, while out buying food at the market, Yaakov heard that the office manager had suffered a stroke and died overnight! Yaakov was able to begin teaching Torah, confident that no one would be reporting him or monitoring his activities.

The Candles Question

Despite the dangers, I found a simple way to recruit new students. After strolling around the main city square and marketplace, I would approach a young boy and ask a religious question – usually whether his mother lit Sabbath candles at home. Non-Jewish children would answer with a puzzled look and walk away, but Jewish children would nod hesitantly, allowing me to begin a discussion on Torah, *alef-beit*, and Hashem – and culminating in yet another member of our *cheder*.

One day, while strolling through the streets of Samarkand, I noticed a boy with Jewish features. I earned his trust by addressing him as if he were an adult. Within a few minutes, I learned that his name was Emmanuel Shimonov – and that he

was completely unaware of his heritage.

"Does your mother light candles at home?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered suspiciously, "she lights candles on Friday night. Why do you need to know?"

I knew I had found yet another *neshama.* Emmanuel was justifiably wary toward a total stranger questioning him about religious practices, but I had already won him over.

"Who was our forefather Avraham?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"Have you heard of *alef-beit*?"

"I don't know."

"Do you know why your mother lights candles on Friday night?"



Some of the many who attended Rabbi Gavriel Niyazov's shiur in Netanya after prayers in his shul. Bottom row, right to left: Rabbis Menachem Levayov, Gavriel Niyazov, Avraham Chaim Ladayev. Top row, left to right: Mordechai Ladayov, Yasha Yakubov, Mishael Yitzchakov, Simcha Leveyov, Rabbi Shlomo Arye Niyazov, Rabbi Pinchas Yakubov, Yitzchakov, Borochov Sr. and Borochov Jr.

"No."

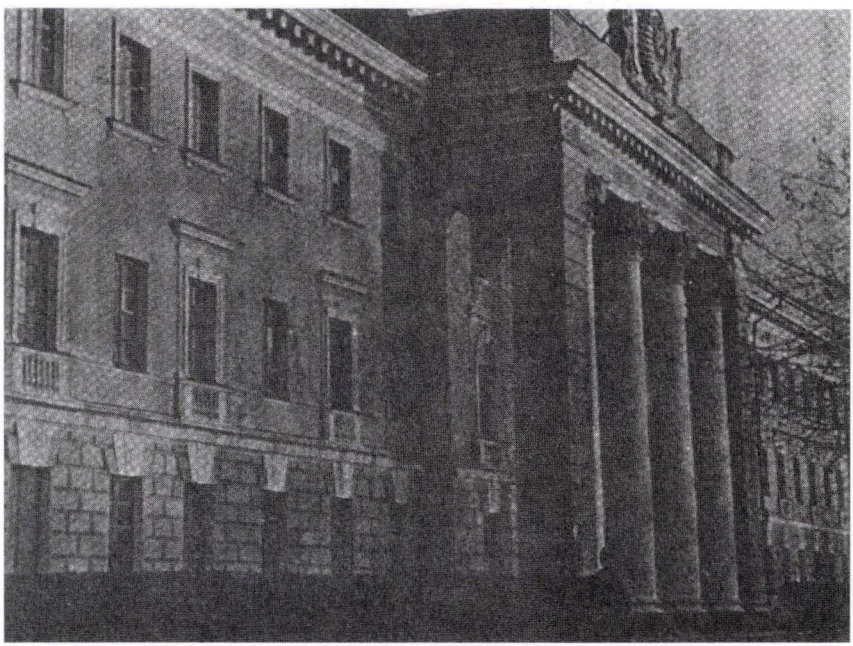
I began to speak to him more at length about the great gift of Shabbos, and the conversation turned to Torah and Yiddishkeit. Like all the other children I met, Emmanuel thirsted to hear more. After a half hour, I could see that he was ready to join our *cheder.*

"We are looking for students to study Torah," I whispered. "Would you like to come with other boys your age and join them in learning *alef-beit?*"

His face lit up like a chandelier. "Yes," he answered, excitedly.

"Follow me," I said. I led Emmanuel to a nondescript house not far from where he lived. "This is our secret location. You will join me and other children your age; together we will study Torah."

Emmanuel, like the other children in the *cheder,* knew very well the dangers of joining. Despite this, they arrived every day in time for lessons. To the best of my knowledge, their parents



KGB headquarters

assumed they were doing homework with friends or playing outside. The need for utmost secrecy had been impressed upon all the children. We were conspirators; no one could know of our classroom.

"Not a single person can share our secret," I warned them repeatedly. "Not your friends, not your neighbors, not your grandparents, and not your parents."

This condition proved extremely difficult. Imagine a five- or six-year-old unable to share anything about his day in school with his parents, or to show off his knowledge of the *alef-beit* or the *parsha*, the weekly Torah portion. Nevertheless, the children performed admirably, never revealing any information about these *chadorim*.

Stability may be a mainstay of education, but Emmanuel and the others quickly became used to frequent changes. One day we studied in a hidden basement, another on the rooftops, another in a room with sealed windows. Barred and locked windows prevented curious strangers from peering in. Students were given *sefarim* with strict instructions to hide them among



Photo from mid 1970s of Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov (second from right) with several of his students, including Emmanuel Shimonov.

their secular schoolbooks, which they carried to *cheder* in their schoolbags.

Despite these precautions, our fears grew daily. We were no match for the surveillance tactics of the KGB. Officers were stationed around some of the *chadorim,* positioning photographers with long-range lenses to catch us in the act.

One day in 5733 (1973), a pair of grown men fell in beside a student as he walked to our *cheder.* "Follow us," they growled, leading the boy to an unmarked location. They scattered photos across the table, trying to frighten him into talking. The boy had to draw upon great reserves of inner strength to remain calm and silent.

"Just tell us one thing," the police repeated, "just this one thing and we will let you go. Are you learning Torah with Shlomo Chai Niyazov?"

The student denied everything, knowing all the while that the police knew he was lying. He noticed the number 1945 tattooed on the arm of a police officer.



(Left) Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov, (center) Emmanuel Shimonov

"Look!" they ordered, removing another package of photos. "Here is a picture of you entering the home where you study with Shlomo. Here is another of you leaving.

"Can you see the timestamp? There is a two-hour gap between them. You are studying Torah with Shlomo, right?"

The boy realized that he had been trapped. "Okay, okay," he stammered. "I know Shlomo. He teaches me Torah."

Later, after his release, he reported back to me in tears about implicating me during the interrogation. I calmed him down with the words I had heard from my own teachers: "*Fear no man; fear Hashem alone.* And, if it ever happens again, don't look them in the eye. They know how to hypnotize people. Don't be upset; nothing will happen to me."

When asked to describe the police officer to the best of his ability, the boy told me about the "1945" tattoo, which I mentally filed away. Indeed, a few years later in 1977, I was summoned to police headquarters.

"We have signed proof from twenty-five boys who testified that you are both illegally involved in teaching them Torah," the officer thundered.

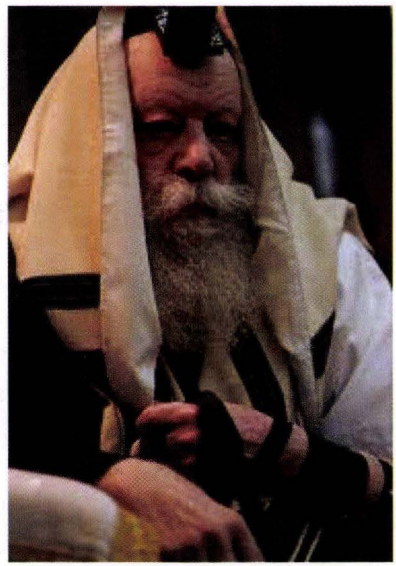


The Rebbe coming out to the Lag Be'Omer parade, 18th of Iyar 5740 (1980), Rabbi Niyazov holding his son Avraham.

"Bah!" I spat. "Complete fabrication! Show me the proof."

The officer refused. As he spoke, his sleeve rode up his arm, and I caught sight of the very same tattoo. I had to exert great self-control not to show any fear.

"Young man, you are creating many problems for the Motherland. If you confess and promise to never do it again," the officer continued, "I will let you off with a warning."



The seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson

He then pushed a pen and paper toward me. "I will dictate and you will write: I, Shlomo Chai Niyazov, have committed the following crimes," which he listed – among them, teaching Torah to children – and ended with, "I promise never to do them again."

I took the pen, blocked out his voice, and wrote the following:

> *I, Shlomo Chai Niyazov, did not teach Torah to any children. Instead, I only taught them to read the Hebrew alphabet, the alef-beit, which is not against Soviet law. Any Torah that they know is from my grandfather, Gavriel Niyazov, who left the country in 1972.*

I signed and put the pen down. Miraculously, the officer took back the document, shoved it into a drawer, and he let me leave – without even bothering to check what I had written!

Following this incident the parents, informed that their son was involved in "forbidden" religious activities, realized he was learning with "some rabbi" and they asked him once or twice for my identity. However, when he did not answer, they never again mentioned it – a tacit agreement to our arrangement.

The *Gemara* (*Yevamot, 121*) relates the following story:

> *Rabban Gamliel said: "Once I was traveling on a boat and, from a distance, I saw another boat that shattered and sank. My heart grieved for the many casualties, especially over the apparent death of the great Torah scholar who was on board. Who was it? Rabbi Akiva. But when I disembarked, he came, and sat, and deliberated before me in halachic matters."*
>
> *"My son,' I said to him, 'who rescued you from drowning in the water?"*
>
> *'A plank from the boat came to me,' he replied, 'I seized it and I bent my head before each and every wave that came surging towards me. The waves did not wash me off of the board, and I reached the shore."*

The *Gemara* is not a mere storybook; there must be a deeper meaning to this anecdote. The "boat" refers to the community; the Torah scholar is the captain of the congregation. When a congregation is devastated, it is similar to a ship that has capsized in the ocean.



Photo from mid 1970s of Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov (fifth from right) with several of his students, including Emmanuel Shimonov.

Now, Rabbi Akiva raised 24,000 disciples, but, due to their lack of respect for each other, they died between the holidays of Pesach and Shavuot. Rabban Gamliel was so heartbroken to hear of this catastrophe; he was sure that Rabbi Akiva would never recover from the grief of this overwhelming loss.

Instead the opposite occurs: Rabbi Akiva comes and sits before Rabban Gamliel and deliberated with him in halachic matters – as though nothing had transpired. "How were you saved?" Rabban Gamliel cries out. "How did you keep your sanity, to continue studying Torah as deeply as before?"

Now, a handful of students had survived the plague afflicting Rabbi Akiva's students, among them his prized disciple – Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. During the cruel persecution by the Roman Emperor Hadrian, when Talmudic academies were shuttered and Torah study forbidden on penalty of death, Rabbi Akiva continued to teach Torah publicly, with his devoted disciple at his side. Even when Rabbi Akiva was arrested, Shimon continued to visit his master in prison to receive instruction there.



Talmidim and colleagues of Rabbi Niyazov,
From right to left: Gavriel Kohinov, Yair Eishayov, Moshe Abramov,
Moshe Chachamov, Boris Barayov and Reuben Hafizov.

Gal, the Hebrew word for "wave," has the numerical value of thirty-three. This symbolizes *lag be'omer*, the 33rd day of the *Omer*, when we celebrate Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. And this is what Rabbi Akiva answered to Rabban Gamliel: "Yes, I had thousands of students who died, but even if a handful survive, or one comes out teaching Torah to others – it's all worth it."

I share the same sentiments about my students. Although I taught the *alef bet* and Torah to many, many students, the fact that some of my prized students, like Emmanuel, have become leaders in their respective communities, teaching Torah to an ever-expanding audience, has brought me great satisfaction.

Supernatural Manner

Slowly, steadily, our network grew. I attracted increasing numbers of students off the streets, and our locations expanded beyond our wildest dreams. In turn, many of my own students became themselves teachers – Moshe Chachamov, Yair and Moshe Elishayev, Emmanuel Shimonov, Yisroel and Yekutiel Abayov. Another student, Yossi Ladayov, prepared meals that they could eat "on the go" while going out in the evenings to teach others. While the Kremlin continued to arrest and exile Chassidim for daring to teach Torah to children, we continued living with the Rebbe's clarion call to reach out to an ever-growing number of Jewish youth. All in all, we had close to five hundred learning Torah!

As our students grew older, we began recruiting them to help alongside the many other young Chassidim involved in the organization Ezras Achim, "helping our brothers." They received instructions from the Rebbe regarding the construction of more synagogues, *mikvaot*, and *chadorim*. All this had to be implemented under the tightest veil of secrecy.

By the time Emmanuel reached seventeen, the volunteers of Ezras Achim reached out to him and began giving him different assignments.

"The Rebbe wants us to reopen the main shul," they said, "and later we will reestablish the *mikvah*."

Reopening the shul was a daunting task: the Soviets had allocated the building to a certain family, and two brothers were feuding in court over its control. Soon, the first miracle occurred: one of the brothers died and the family withdrew their suit. A second miracle followed when the government agreed to return the building to the possession of the Jewish community. Emmanuel and his group had the shul open and functioning within a week!

The Rebbe then gave word to rebuild the *mikvah*, but Emmanuel and his group were at a loss how to proceed: Samarkand lay in the grip of a severe construction shortage. Not a brick could be found, no matter the price. Even worse, whatever materials could be obtained would be legally seized.

But then the third miracle occurred: a government bulletin that unlimited building supplies would be made available for private citizens – for free! Dumbfounded, Emmanuel rallied his friends; together they claimed ten thousand bricks needed for the *mikvah*. Sure enough, after a few weeks, another government bulletin circulated, canceling the program. Emmanuel and his helpers had the *mikvah* rebuilt and operational within a very short time.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the newfound freedoms, the underground organization Ezras Achim was no longer needed. Emmanuel had ample opportunity to leave Samarkand, but, with the encouragement and blessing of the Rebbe, he stayed behind for many years as a central force in the reconstruction of the religious community. As long as Jews remained in Samarkand, the shul and *cheder* continued to grow – along with many other Jewish institutions, including a library.

Today, after the mass exodus of Bukharian Jewry, Emmanuel continues to lead his community in the enclaves of New York as rabbi of Beth Gavriel Bukharian Jewish Center of Queens. The roots established after our brief encounter on the streets of Samarkand sprouted offshoots and branches to this very day.

ПУТЕВКА В «РАЙ»

...ПОСМОТРИШЬ со стороны на Давида Ниязова — сама святая кротость. Голос тихий, глаза смиренно опущены и одеяние самое непритязательное: ничего-то ему, рабу божьему, от людей не надо!

Таким набожным человеком и слыл Давид среди окрестных жителей.

А Давид внутренне ликовал: как здорово он играет свою роль — артист! Нет, никогда и никто из них, одураченных, не догадается, о чем мечтает Давид Ниязов, когда тихим и сладким голосом проповедует о райской жизни на берегах Иордана и холмах Сиона. Нет, никто и никогда не догадается о том, что маска святого человека нужна ему только для карьеры, или, как «там» выражаются — для бизнеса.

Главное, о чем он мечтал, к чему стремился всей душой, — заслужить благосклонное внимание цадика* Шнеерсона из Нью-Йорка, которого Давид почтительно именует дедушкой. Ведь если захочет дедушка, то многих осчастливить может... Но для этого надо постараться, ох, как постараться!

И он старался... Еще лет двадцать тому назад Давид сколотил из фанеры ларек во улице Худжумской и превратился в скромного заведующего пунктом по приему ваты. На прилавке всегда лежал товар — вата, посеревшая от пыли, а тихий завпунктом изредка почесывал пятерней затылок — проблема выполнения плана его явно не волновала.

План был другой — как можно больше поймать душ человеческих на крючок сионизма. Ведь только так можно было завоевать доверие дедушки Шнеерсона.

Совсем иное назначение было у невзрачного фанерного ларька: отсюда, неподалеку от синагоги, удобно было вести наблюдение за прохожими. И когда на пути к синагоге появлялся он — «господин иностранец» — Давид мгновенно преображался. Ласкал «высокого гостя» восхищенным взглядом, смиренный завпункт по приему ваты просил передать его ближайший поклон цадику Шнеерсону из Нью-Йорка. И тут же, из рук в руки, передавал «господину иностранцу» адреса вновь обработанных им Давидом хасидов.

И (наконец-то!) старания ловца душ из далекого Самарканда были замечены. Дедушка из Нью-Йорка распорядился взять новоявленного внука на довольствие и высылать по адресам, предлагаемым Давидом, посылки.

Чем рассчитывался американский цадик с самаркандским хасидом — модными штанами или жевательной резинкой — это особого значения не имеет. Содержимое посылок реализовывалось среди верующих, а выручка поступала компании «Давид и сын».

Необычный спекулянт от сионизма вскоре приобрел на выручку собственный дом с двумя ходами — парадным и черным. Вдохновленные заокеанскими подачками, Давид и его сын Шоломхай, дабы заслужить еще большую благосклонность цадика из Нью-Йорка, решили заняться и идейным растлением несовершеннолетних... В калитку дома по улице Улугбека входили наголо остриженные пугливые малыши, держа в руках обернутые в тряпицы молитвенники. А уходили они из дома через несколько часов уже другим ходом — на улицу Белинского. Что втолковывали часами Давид и Шоломхай несмышленым малышам — понять нетрудно. Ведь чем больше одурачено голов (пусть даже ребячьих), тем щедрее и ласковее дедушка Шнеерсон.

Время от времени у дома с двумя ходами появлялись «господа из-за рубежа». Возбужденный домовладелец изо всех сил старался произвести благоприятное впечатление на возможных ревизоров. «Кто сказал, что хасидов в Самарканде зажимают?! — храбрился Давид. — Неправда, мы что хотим, то и делаем!»

И выручка от посылок за растление душ по-прежнему поступала в адрес компании «Давид и сын».

А какие сцены разыгрывали Давид и Шоломхай, изображая радость по поводу переезда на райские берега Иордана! Держа в руках анкеты на выезд в «землю обетованную», они чуть ли не танцуя, со слезами на глазах, нет, не говорили, а пели от счастья: «Уезжаем, уезжаем в милый сердцу Израиль!»

Этот шаманский танец с анкетами окончательно затуманивал мозги наиболее простоватым зрителям, и они решались на роковой шаг.

Сколько людей отправили таким путем в «рай» ловцы душ? Сколько судеб загубили они?!

И странное дело: размахивая перед глазами ошеломленных зрителей анкетами и распевая неизменное «Уезжаем, уезжаем в милый сердцу Израиль!», Давид и Шоломхай сами не торопятся попасть в «рай» (хотя разрешение на выезд в Израиль они получили давно). По-прежнему ловцы душ отравляют сознание детей растлетворными идеями хасидизма, по-прежнему совершают вредные для здоровья людей религиозные обряды, по-прежнему исполняют различные поручения цадика из Нью-Йорка...

Пытались поговорить начистоту с Давидом Ниязовым в исполкоме районного Совета народных депутатов. Но владелец дома с двумя ходами опять сыграл роль — святого простачка.

Вот как протекала эта беседа:

— Почему вы нарушаете законы?

— Быть того не может! Я строго соблюдаю законы Моисеевы...

— Вы нарушаете советские законы.

— Возможно, я с ними не знаком — занят, некогда изучать... Поясните?

— Вы незаконно обучаете детей религии.

— А разве нельзя?

— Можно. Но с согласия родителей и разрешения властей. И при нормальных условиях, не подвергая детей идейному растлению. А вы...

— Простите, не знал, больше не буду! Да и обучал-то я детей не религии, а всего лишь ивриту*. А о том, что их родина находится на берегах Иордана, дети сами узнали — из книжек, которые привозят туристы... Я тут ни при чем. Я только им непонятные места из книжек объяснял и то, заметьте, без искажения.

— Вы исполняете обряды венчания и расторжения браков?

— Да, да... Но с разрешения цадика Шнеерсона. Нет-нет, никакой он не американец! Он наш цадик, наследный. Его, малолетнего, вместе с престарелым отцом, когда-то выпроводили из Ленинграда за антисоветчину... Полагаю, что Шнеерсона следовало бы реабилитировать — ведь он тогда совсем маленьким был!

Вот так, внешне вежливо и в то же время настойчиво и беззастенчиво, защищал свое право жить за счет обмана новоявленный внук цадика Шнеерсона.

После официальных бесед «смиренный» Давид с сыном опять стали исполнять шаманский танец с анкетами под знакомый припев: «Уезжаем, уезжаем в милый сердцу Израиль!».

Да, владельцы дома с двумя ходами сильно заняты: им не только взрослых, но и несовершеннолетних надо обработать и как можно больше — иначе не видать подачек от цадика из Нью-Йорка. Им, видите ли, некогда изучать законы нашей страны...

Что ж, давно пора предоставить ловцам душ соответствующие возможности — привлечь их к ответственности по статье 147 Уголовного кодекса УзССР. Они этого заслуживают.

А. ДАВИДОВ.

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* В хасидизме, реакционном течении иудаизма, цадик — посредник между богом и верующими.

* Иврит — государственный язык в Израиле.

Ленинский путь

НАШ АДРЕС: 703000, САМАРКАНД, ул. У. ТУРСУНОВА, 80, ДОМ ПЕЧАТИ.

ТЕЛЕФОНЫ: отдел писем — 5-06-, секретариат — 5-02-18. Отделы: парти сельского хозяйства — 5-05-15, культу

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1978 article from Lenin's Path besmirching the Niyazov family, calling them "the grandchildren of the Tzadik Schneerson."

"Grandfather Schneerson"

We had finally gotten our exit visas, but because my second son was born we needed to arrange more paperwork. Again, the KGB was on our case. Although we knew we were being watched, we did not suspect that journalists for the local newspaper *In Lenin's Path* were working to destroy our reputation.

One day, a year and a half after we were first summoned before the GPU, this full-page article appeared. Laced with ridicule and hate, it denounced us for teaching Torah to children and for being the Rebbe's Chassidim.

My father kept a few copies of this article and gave them out to people. He also had one sent to the Rebbe via Rabbi Bernard Levy. (In the article, "David" refers to my father, while "Sholom-Chai" refers to me.)



Rabbi David Niyazov with his son Shlomo Chai celebrating Simchat Torah party in Boro Park 2010

The Guide to the Garden of Eden
By A. Davidoff

At first glance, with his soft voice, downward turned eyes and simple clothing, David Niyazov appears to be a student of pious humility. As a righteous servant of G-d, he needs no favors from mortal men! Local residents of our city [Samarkand] view him as a religious figure.

Yet, in his heart, David rejoices at having successfully duped everyone around him. His victims will never know what lurks behind his soft, sweet stories of a life in the Garden of Eden, on the banks of the Jordan River. His victims will never know that this is simply propaganda: a way for David to advance his career and become a "household name" in Chassidic circles. His central aspiration and singular goal is simple—to get as much attention as possible from the *tzaddik* of New York, whom David respectfully refers to as "Grandfather."

"Grandfather" can bring happiness to many people—if they work hard enough. And David has worked very hard.



Rabbi David Niyazov giving a daily Torah class to the members of Congregation L'Maan Achai Bukharim

Having erected a quiet kiosk on Chugmoskia Street using simple pieces of plywood, David has successfully pretended for twenty years to be nothing more than the modest proprietor of woolen clothing. Fabric piles up haphazardly on the counter; one needs to merely touch the abandoned clothing in order to send clouds of dust into the air. The owner of the kiosk periodically rummages through the clothing, but his mind is really elsewhere. His "business" plans are fixed entirely on one goal: to capture as many Jews as possible in the net of Judaism and Zionism. This is the only way for him to earn the trust of "Grandfather" Schneerson.

The modest, wooden kiosk has a singular purpose: from his vantage point near the synagogue, David can easily track all passersby. Whenever he sees a tourist—a "lord from abroad"—David immediately undergoes a transformation: his humble manner gives way to flattery and fawning as he emotionally asks these tourists to give his warmest regards to the *tzaddik* Schneerson, handing them a handwritten list containing names and addresses of local Jews he has seduced.



Members attending a daily Torah class given by Rabbi David Niyazov given at Congregation L'Maan Achai Bukharim, 41st Street



Rabbi Bernard (Berel) Levy

After much effort, the kidnapper of Samarkand's souls achieves his goal, finally earning his much-sought recognition from the *tzaddik* of New York. The *tzaddik* commands his followers to spread their net of protection over this new "grandson," to send care packages to David for the addresses presented on his list.

It matters not whether the *tzaddik* in America is paying David in currency of chewing gum or fashionable pants. All that matters is that these care packages are sold to the naïve general public who remain blissfully unaware that the company of "David and Son" uses this money to fund these illegal activities.

These Zionist speculators recently purchased a private residence with two entrances—one in front, and, importantly, an exit in the back. Encouraged by the donations they receive from the *tzaddik* in New York and desirous of garnering even more of his praise, David and his son, Sholom-Chai, have started destroying the character traits of little children. One can find young, frightened children entering their home, holding prayer books wrapped in cloth. After a few hours of study, the children are herded out—through the back entrance.

It is not difficult to guess what sort of propaganda David and Sholom-Chai teach these children. The more heads they can count, the more people they can brainwash—including very young children—the more fatherly attention and donations they will receive from "Grandfather Schneerson" in New York.

Sometimes, when tourists from overseas visit this two-entranced house, David or Sholom-Chai will approach these "overseas lords" and strenuously impress their authority. "Who says that Jews are oppressed in Samarkand?" they ask heatedly. "It's a lie! We do whatever we want here!"

Profits from overseas packages go toward financing the brainwashing of our young children. Such dramatic plays this duo performs! Dancing hand-in-hand, they sing aloud their aspiration to move to the "Promised Land" on the banks of the Jordan River. You can see them practically tear up with emotion as they sing, *"We will journey, we will journey, to our Beloved Land."* This dancing and clapping is another arrow in their arsenal to brainwash the simpleminded folk who watch these dances. This father-son duo uses this last, fatal step of sending our people over the edge. How many people have fallen under the spell of these two and have left our country for the so-called "Garden of Eden?" Can we count the number of promising futures these two have destroyed?

The hypocrisy is mindboggling: David and Sholom-Chai long ago received exit visas to travel to their "Beloved Land!" Despite this, they wave flags, dance, clap, and sing —*"We will journey, we will journey, to our Beloved Land"*— while their exit visas remain untouched and unused. How strange. These kidnappers of souls continue to poison the minds of our children with the fantasies of Chassidus, religious plays and songs detrimental to the wellbeing of our children, or any other instruction received from the *tzaddik* of New York.

I enlisted the help of community representatives to confront David and conduct a direct interview. David presents himself as a simple, law-abiding citizen, hiding behind a mask of innocence. This is how it went:

Reporter: Why are you breaking the law?

David: Impossible! I keep all the Mosaic laws of the Jews—the easy laws and the difficult laws.

Reporter: I'm not referring to those laws. Why are you breaking Soviet law?

David: Maybe. I am not expert in Soviet law. I'm a busy man, with no time to study Soviet law. Maybe you want to teach me?

Reporter: You teach religion to young children. That's illegal.

David: Is it really illegal?

Reporter: It is allowed—provided you have permission from the child's parents and from the local authorities. And only when provided in a regular, structured environment that does not destroy the ideological mindset of the child. But you...

David: Excuse me, I was unaware, and I will discontinue, but I am merely teaching children the Hebrew language. They don't need me to teach them that their birthplace is at the banks of the Jordan River; they know this already from the books that tourists bring into our country. I have nothing to do with it. If anything, I help them understand sections of these books, and I teach it to them without adding any embellishment.

Reporter: But you do officiate at Jewish marriages and divorces, yes?

David: Yes, but the tzaddik Schneerson allows me to perform these religious services. No, no—he is not a Westerner, an American. He is our tzaddik, [continuing the tradition] of the righteous of many generations. When he was still a young child, our government exiled him and his elderly father from the city of Leningrad, having accused them of anti-Soviet sentiment. I think he should be granted a pardon; he was just a young child at the time!

And so it went, David masquerading behind a screen of politeness as he fielded my questions with brash impudence—defending his right to live a life of duplicity, encouraged by the duplicity of the new tzaddik Schneerson. After our official interview had concluded, David and his son even had the nerve to join hands and dance for us, singing their famous song: "We want to travel, to travel, to the land of Israel, the land so beloved to us."

These managers of the city's two great synagogues have their hands full. It is hardly enough that they teach religion to the adults—no, they work just as hard poisoning the minds of young children. The more children they reach, the better: without these children, they would not earn any contributions from the tzaddik in New York. You see, this duo is so busy that they have no time to learn our local laws...

It is high time to give these kidnappers their due punishment. They deserve to stand trial for violating section 147 of the penal law of the Socialist Uzbek-Soviet Republic. They deserve it!

The article caused a tremendous local furor. People practically shouted at me to grab my family and leave, to save them from imprisonment. However, no one knew that by then we had already received our exit visas and were scheduled to leave shortly. The article — I hoped — could not do us any harm.

But then I was summoned to appear before the KGB.

"How is it that you are *still* teaching Torah?" they demanded, waving the newspaper angrily in my face.

"We have visas to leave the country," I said smoothly, "but we just had a baby boy, so we need to update our paperwork. We are leaving very soon."

The KGB accepted this answer and let me go free.

Exodus

Finally, in 1978, our daily tribulations came to an end. Although local government officials kept threatening to cancel our exit visas in retaliation for our religious activities, in the end they allowed us to leave.

We had packed 140 *seforim* to take with us but, after counting them all, Uzbek officials would allow us only "no more than 120 Jewish books." But I had one last trick up my sleeve: I included a *Sefer Torah* and two *megillot* among this number of items, hoping to smuggle them out.

We boarded a train to Moscow, watching with mixed emotions our hometown of Samarkand recede into the distance. Generations of our family had spent their entire lives in Samarkand, yet we could not live there as religious Jews any longer.

When we arrived in Moscow, indignant immigration officers tried to block us from taking out the *Sefer Torah* and the two *megillot*, but lacked legal redress to challenge our permit. These holy items left Soviet soil with us. Our fear of the government was so ingrained that I worried the recent newspaper article about me would have repercussions. My only consolation: my father and I had given copies of the article to Rabbi Levy with the request that he use all his power to secure a smooth passage.

"Don't worry," he assured us. "Travel safely and all will be well."

We were taken to Brest, near the Polish-Belarus border, where representatives of the *sachnut* – a Jewish agency for immigrants to Eretz Yisrael – waited to greet us.

"We are here to help prepare you for the trip to Israel," they said. "You will leave Brest in a few days."

We were initially moved to Vienna, a chief transit point, where we spent ten days. (Some Bukharian Jews have remained there; a small community exists there today.) The *sachnut* gave us the opportunity to contact family in Eretz Yisrael – who, to our tremendous surprise, advised us to say we wanted to go to America.

At first, my father would not even hear of it: all of Russian Jewry dreamed of the day they could live in the Holy Land, and Bukharian Jews especially – including many members of the Niyazov family – had overcome formidable obstacles along the way. But my mother argued, "We really should go to America first, since everyone is telling us. Besides, don't we want to see the Rebbe?"

The *sachnut,* sensing our hesitancy, furnished us with a pleasant apartment in Italy, where we lived for the next three months. I purchased fish and slaughtered our own chicken. We met Rabbi Gershon Mendel Garelik, the Chabad emissary to Milan, and, within a week, were invited to his daughter's wedding. My father and I went to the lovely ceremony – finally experiencing what it meant to celebrate a Jewish wedding publicly, without fear of retribution.



Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Garelick and Rabbi David Niyazov at a wedding in Italy

Indecision made time pass slowly. After three months, when we finally informed the *sachnut* of our decision to go to America, a large stretched van pulled up outside our apartment at midnight, and six armed guards jumped out of a second vehicle.

We were alarmed: had the Soviets come to kill us in revenge? It turned out that the *sachnut* had transferred our case to a different organization, which had come to move us out of the apartment. Our family numbered fourteen souls – hence the large-passenger van.



Rabbi Gershon Mendel Garelik

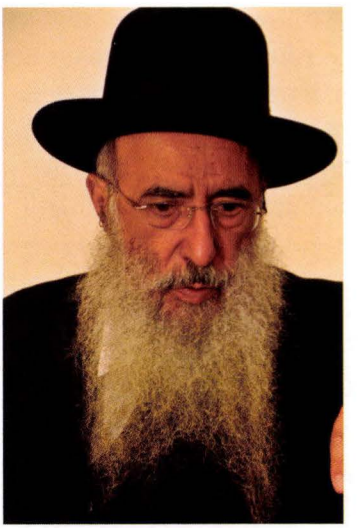
Special Encounters

We landed in New York City on December 20, 1978, and fell into the emotional embrace of family members at the airport. Outside, a school bus waited – arranged by Rabbi Eliyahu Niasoff, my father's second cousin. Rabbi Chananya Niyazov, visiting from Israel, was also present. After loading all our belongings, we were whisked away to the secluded neighborhood of Seagate, in Brooklyn. Within a week, a relative found an apartment for us in Borough (Boro) Park, a growing Orthodox neighborhood in Brooklyn, and we moved yet again.

A day or two passed. Suddenly Rabbi Levy appeared at our door.

Bernard (Berel) Levy was a larger-than-life figure renowned as a pioneer of kosher certification. The first to make extensive trips to the Far East to inspect the products impacting the kosher food industry, Rabbi Levy had an impressive array of international connections. Whenever asked by the Rebbe to perform a particular task in a foreign land – *mikvah* in the Philippines, *mechitza* (gender partition) in Kobe, Japan – Rabbi Levy always

came through. He was also one of the first to make "business trips" to Russia, where he met secretly with Chassidim, teaching Torah, leading *farbrengens,* and transmitting messages between the Rebbe and his Chassidim behind the Iron Curtain.



Rabbi Eliyahu Niasoff

Rabbi Levy was one of those to whom my father had given a copy of the ludicrous newspaper article about us. He passed it on to the Rebbe after returning to America.

Now the rabbi approached us. "The Rebbe wants to see both of you," he said.

My father and I were shocked. We had planned to visit the Rebbe; no one had dared imagine that the Rebbe would send for us!



Rabbi Niyazov receiving Lekach – honeycake – from the Rebbe

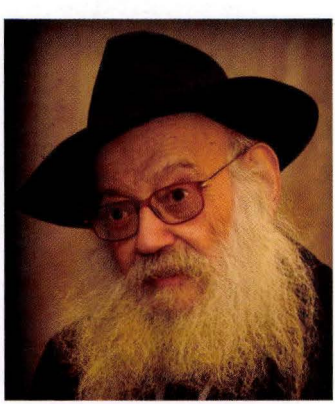


Sheva brachos of Rabbi Shlomo Chai's Niyazov's son-in-law.
Left to right: Avraham Niyazov, Fitzel Baumgarten, David Shakarov (Rabbi Daniel Shakarov's son), Rabbi Shalom Ber Baumgarten, and Rachamin Niyazov.

Rabbi Levy led us to the Rebbe's headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway to participate in the very next *farbrengen*. He himself sat in one of the most coveted spots in the cavernous hall – on a bench right behind the Rebbe's chair. The Rebbe had instructed him to seat "the Niyazov family" on that same bench.

"Let them sit next to you," the Rebbe said.

In between talks, the Rebbe gave my father and me a full cup of wine to say *l'chaim*, make a toast – twice! Rabbi Leibel Groner was the one who came running toward us, pouring us wine. (His nephew later became one of our *mechutanim*, in-laws!) As usual the Rebbe made a single gesture, and



Rabbi Leibel Groner

a bit of wine would be poured, this act of pouring twice – and a full large cup – certainly attracted much attention among the thousands of Chassidim in attendance. I remember my awe, having never expected the Rebbe to award us with such public honor.

Resettlement

A year after our arrival in New York, we located a shul on 12th Avenue in Boro Park. Rabbi Yitzchak Ushpal of Congregation Anshei Lubawitz allowed us to use the basement for our daily minyan. Fifteen other Bukharian families joined us and we created a makeshift congregation.

Although my father and I had ably acclimated to our new country, relishing the religious freedom, we had begun to miss the Bukharian style of prayer back home. A number of our brethren were equally nostalgic. While welcomed, on the one hand, to the American Jewish community, on the other hand we felt like outsiders. We wanted a space we could call our own.

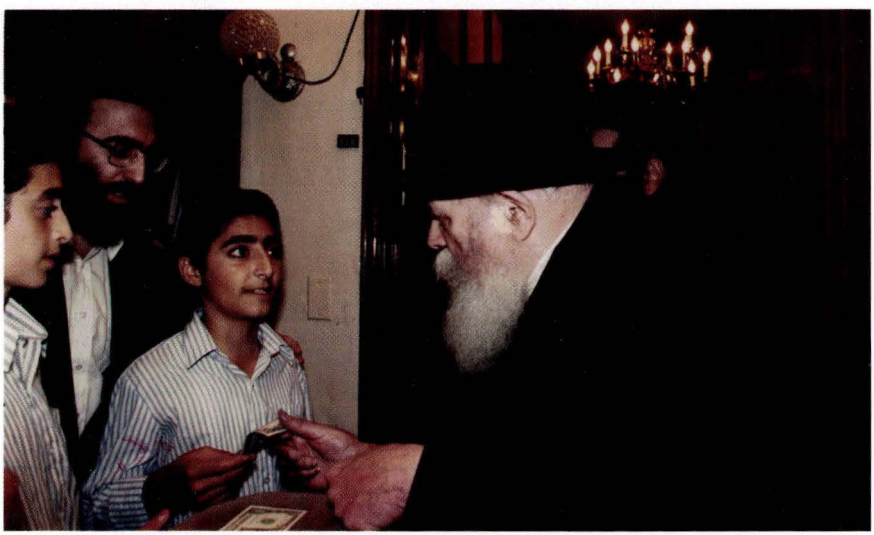


Rabbi Yitzchak Ushpal at the upshernish – haircutting ceremony of the author's son Avraham Niyazov, 1980

When I asked the Lubavitcher Rebbe if we should buy our own synagogue building, the Rebbe replied, "Not yet." A few years later, some thirty-five more Bukharian families moved into the neighborhood. This time, when my father and I asked about buying, the Rebbe gave us a blessing to do so.

In 1984 I found a shul on 41st Street in Boro Park, between 13th and 14th Avenues. The building had formerly housed an Ashkenazic congregation that could no longer muster a minyan. Gazing at the rows of empty seats, I approached the presiding rabbi and said, "You have space but no people. I have people but no space." After we rented their place for a couple of years, a deal was finally made: in the winter of 1988 the Bukharian Jews completed the purchase of their own shul, the first of its kind on American soil, where we restructured the prayer services according to our traditions.

It was here that I founded L'Maan Achai Bukharim. *Achai* – "my brothers" – is also a Hebrew acronym for Eliyahu Mani, Chananya, and Yaakov Niyazov, the three men who went to the Frierdiker Rebbe in 1927 and asked for a *shliach* (Rabbi Simcha Gorodetsky). Through eventual purchase of the synagogue for



Rabbi Niyazov with his two sons, Avraham (right) Yitzchok (left) receiving dollars from Rebbe

the Bukharian community we were able to keep it open, making it the second oldest shul in Boro Park to operate on a daily basis. It became a starting point for hundreds, if not thousands, of new immigrants. We helped them find work while placing their children in yeshivas. For many it was the first shul they ever encountered in their lives.

Our first president was Rabbi Eliyahu Niasoff. In addition to serving in that capacity for several years he also gave beautiful and popular *shiurim*. He even trained some boys to *lein* their bar mitzvah *parsha*. For many years I myself, as official rabbi and founder of the congregation, wore many hats and filled the role of president, as well. But overburdened with other duties, I eventually appointed others to take over that role. This entailed



Newly arrived immigrants from Samarkand in the early 1980s, gathering in the basement of the Bukharian shul on 41st Street for a Torah class. Right to left: Avraham Siyunov and his son Gabbi, unknown, Rachamin Gilkarov, Ari Chai Siyonov, Elusha Shamalov, Simcha Chafizov, Tzion Musayev with his son Avraham. Top row, left to right: Rachamin Hafizov, Nissan Gilkarov, Roma Musayev, Yura Yitzchakov, Refoel Shamalov, Yosef Abramov, Marik Malayov.

dealing with the practical aspects of the shul, be it paperwork, balancing the books, or maintenance of the building.

A few years earlier, I had opened a jewelry factory located at 47th Street in Manhattan – the "Diamond District" – employing hundreds of Bukharian youth, who eventually acquired the experience to open their own businesses and, more importantly, the ability to read from a *siddur*, learn Torah, perform mitzvoth, and increase their *yiras shamayim*, fear of Heaven. Initially they relied on a set of *tallis* and *tefillin* in the factory. Eventually they bought their own, realizing the importance of these items whenever I interrupted my business dealings to lay *tefillin* on Jewish customers who had walked in.

In 1989 our shul gained fame far beyond Brooklyn. We received a warm write-up in a Canadian-Jewish newspaper, when a rabbi was needed to conduct the Russian-language High Holiday services for a congregation, Eitz Chaim, located in Vancouver. Because of passport issues, the rabbi appointed couldn't make it. So instead I hurried over there, leaving my father to conduct the services back home.



One of the many gatherings Rabbi Niyazov arranged for the Bukharian children of Boro Park



Several of the hundreds of talmidim and employees that went through Rabbi Niyazov's work place on 47th Street, where he taught them Torah and a trade. Right to left: Alex, Ruben Katayov, Nattan, Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov, Avraham Suliyamanov, Gavriel, Abbo Leviev. Top row left to right: Uriel Merzakandov, Ruben Mordechayov

With G-d's help the shul L'Maan Achai Bukharim became a success. Currently we have a minyan three times a day, where we pray according to the Bukharian *nusach*, version. We built up a solid, loyal congregation and gave lectures, led Azkaras, organized youth programs, and invited guest rabbis and speakers on Shabbat and on weekdays to give *shiurim* in all topics ranging from *Gemara* to Halacha for people of all ages.

Privately I counseled many couples on *shalom bayis* (marital issues) and tended to other communal needs. In the mid-1980s I began to record dozens of *shiurim* on an array of topics on *chizuk hayahadut* (strengthening Yiddishkeit). Eventually thousands of tapes (and eventually CDs) were made and distributed.

My biggest thrill was starting a Tanya class for our teenage boys. We even printed a Tanya in our shul, in 1988, in memory of Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka Schneerson, the Rebbe's wife. When we presented a copy of a manuscript to the Rebbe, he

gave a blessing and a dollar each to me and my two sons who accompanied me. In addition to local work, I maintained contact with brethren overseas in the waning days of the Soviet Union, winning the respect and cooperation of many, which I will discuss in a later chapter on my trip in 1991 to the former USSR.

Throughout our forty years in Boro Park, thousands of *mispalilim*, congregants, have come through our doors. I personally would like to thank all those members who supported the shul, be it physically or spiritually, all of whom have a *zechut* – merit, that will stand with them forever. During this time we had several other presidents, two of whose names I will mention: Yehuda Sulimanov and Gavriel Gilkarov. Through Divine Providence they have all moved to other communities across the country, from Queens, in New York, to Arizona.

I am also grateful for the help of the current shul president, Yaakov Dayanov, who, after his arrival to the United States in 1994, joined our community. Although a new immigrant, with all the obstacles that entails, he was quickly able to grow spiritually and, with Hashem's help, climb his way up the ranks to become a successful businessman and help us tremendously.



Rabbi Niyazov performing a Bris in Samarkand



Rabbi Niyazov teaching the alef-beit in his Shul on 41st Street

Another person who deserves credit had joined our community in 1999, possessing a special soft vocal talent yet, at the same time, a boldness he had brought with him from Eretz Yisrael. Quickly noticing his potential, I hired him to be my assistant. Rabbi Asher Cohen Boruchov has become an acclaimed *chazzan* and *baal koreh,* cantor and Torah reader. Both these men had taken upon themselves and given of their time and energy, along with that of a few other special members, to enhance the shul.

Another person that deserves mention is Rabbi Mishael Aronbaev, an acclaimed author of many books, whom I wholeheartedly welcomed to the community over thirty years ago. He consistently traveled from Crown Heights on a weekly basis to give *shiurim* to the men and women at L'Maan Achai Bukharim.

In 2006 I partnered with a chef, Mr. Aamnon Kimyagarov, and composed in Russian a Bukharian cookbook, *The Cuisine and Lifestyles of the Bukharian Jews,* through which we introduced

to this country our unique cuisine. I considered this an opportunity to spread more Torah and mitzvoth, so in addition to my financial contribution I included within the cookbook a compilation I wrote in Russian of Torah thoughts, Torah laws and homiletics on the importance of Shabbat, holidays, *kashruth* (from separation of challah to separation of meat and milk), and *chinuch,* the proper education of Jewish children. It all felt worthwhile when people approached me and said that this cookbook had started their path to *teshuvah.* Eventually the demand for the Bukharian cookbook became so great that Aamnon had the book translated into English.

My wife Sofa was always at my side, allowing me to spend so much time with the Bukharian community. A true helpmate to my *shlichus,* she, among her many tasks, gave occasional lectures and organized Rosh Chodesh and Tehillim gatherings, as well as private *kallah* [bridal] classes. She was a superb role model to numerous Bukharian teenage girls. I feel blessed that my wife and I were instrumental in bringing awareness of the our rich



Avraham Niyazov studying Tanya with members of the Youth Minyan at L'Maan Achai Bukharim, 41st Street, Boro Park. Left to right: Avraham Siyunov, Isaac Chaimov, unknown, Eliya Sulimanov, Avraham Niyazov, Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov, Yitzchak Niyazov, Gabbi Sulimanov, David Saidov, Yehoshua Shamel.

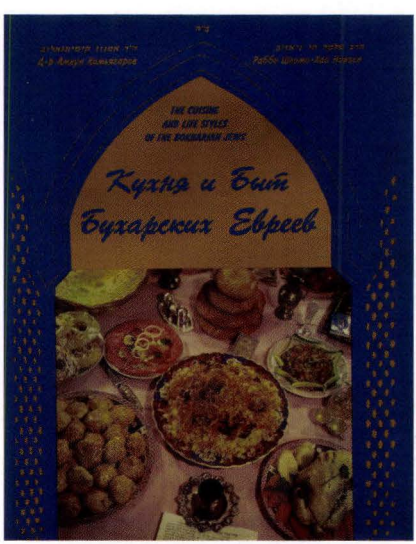
heritage to so many Bukharian Jews and at the same time bringing them closer to an authentic Torah Judaism.

Over the years *hachnassat orchim,* hospitality, has been an active part of our lives. This has extended beyond Shabbat dinners: often a guest might be a new immigrant who stayed at our home for weeks until a suitable dwelling could be found. At times we cheerfully converted our living room into a bedroom.

I also feel blessed to have had the great *zechut* to bring hundreds of fellow Bukharian Jews to the Rebbe for farbrengens, *kos shel bracha* and dollars etc. . . . . On Tisha B'Av, I arranged for school buses to bring dozens of students to the Ohel. Although visiting a tzaddik's gravesite on the saddest day of the year is not a Chabad custom, it is commonly practiced among Bukharian Jews.

I am also fortunate to be on the giving side, where for close to my forty years of communal service I did not take even one penny as a salary. Instead, I was able to sponsor most of the shul projects on my own.

Also in 2006, my congregation purchased the building adjacent to our synagogue. A big thanks goes to Michael Ariyev, who helped us facilitate a mortgage. We used this building for the Youth Minyan and other community events. In 2014, with the help of my son Yitzchak Niyazov, my cousin Yasha Arabov, and many others, we were able to lower the mortgage, eventually allowing us to pay it off in full and thus obtain permits to create one big edifice.



The Bukharian Kosher cookbook

In 2019 our two buildings were heavily

renovated. As of this writing they have finally been combined into one beautiful shul, where all are welcome to experience true freedom, and where they can pray, learn, and feel openly proud of their heritage.

Priceless Reward

Like other rabbis in my position, I encountered all kinds of people when running my own shul, each with their individual needs. I helped whenever I could. In addition to job and yeshiva placement, I provided financial assistance, food for Shabbos and holidays, clothing, even room and board.

Passover was a particularly stressful time, with its special foods and preparations. All leavening products, *chametz,* must be thoroughly cleaned out or removed, with unique foods not



Rabbi Shlomo Chai Niyazov presenting the Bukharian cookbook to the Kaliver Rebbe of Williamsburg

eaten other times of the year. I also gave out *blechs* – aluminum sheets placed over stoves on Shabbos, when cooking is prohibited – to accommodate the stringent cooking, as well as brand new *negel vasser* cups and bowls. Immigrants lined up in shul before Pesach to receive these items.

I even gave out *tzitzit*. It made no difference to me if the issue was poverty or lack of religious upbringing: whoever needed the ritual fringes would receive a pair from me – at no charge. (I also, on occasion, gave out *tefillin*, or arranged for their purchase.)

Once, back in 5752/1992, an immigrant family named Shalomov from Uzbekistan arrived at my shul, which they began to attend regularly. To the husband, Issac, I presented a brand new pair of *tzitzit*. One week later, as we were chatting after *davening*, I suddenly spied a five-year-old boy clinging to his side.

"What's your name, little boy?"' I asked.

"Rachamim," he responded shyly.

"Where's he learning?" I asked the father.



Rabbi Niyazov leading a Farbrengen with Rabbi Mishael Aronbaev and Rabbi Moshe Abramov at L'Maan Achai Bukharim, 41st Street, Boro Park

"I have no idea," the father replied. "We're still figuring out where to send him.

I withdrew a piece of paper. "Here is the name of a yeshiva, Toras Emes Kaminetz, on 16th Avenue in Boro Park. Tell the principal my name, and where you *daven*. If they have any questions, tell them to call me."

The father dutifully obeyed. He met with the principal, who immediately asked, "Where do you *daven*?"

"Rabbi Niyasov's shul, on 41st Street."

After the lengthy interview the principal sadly shook his head. "I am sorry, but we have no room."

"What do you mean?" the father gasped. "We sat here talking. Now you tell me there is no room?"

He withdrew to the corner of the administrative office and started crying. This created such a scene that other staff members gathered around, trying to comfort him, until one lady said to the principal, "See, he's crying. You upset him."

"Look," the principal sighed, "there's no room."

Then he approached the immigrant. "Listen, how are you going to prove to me you're Jewish?"

Mr. Shalomov, whose English wasn't so fluent, stared around the room, then blushed. "Listen, there are ladies here. I can't pull down my pants!"

"No, G-d forbid," laughed the principal. "I know you are circumcised. That is done in your country. I meant something else."

His face turned serious. "Prove to me that if your son attends a Jewish school you will also behave in a Jewish way at home."

"But I keep the Torah," the father insisted.

"You really keep the Torah?" the principal countered, with a trace of contempt. "Let me see if you're wearing *tzitzit*. If you are, well . . . then I'll take your son in tuition-free."

"Really?" the father asked, in amazement.

The principal nodded. "I promise."

Proudly the man opened his shirt to reveal the brand new pair of *tzitzit* I had given him the previous week.

The principal's eyes widened in surprise. "Let me call you back," he stammered in confusion. "I need to think about it. Like I said, we have no room."

When he tried to retire to his office, the staff people blocked his way. "You made a promise if he wears *tzitzit*," the same lady argued, pointing to the father. "He showed you his *tzitzit*; now, you must keep your word. You can't renege on your commitment."

In the end, the young son of my congregant was taken in, tuition-free, for that year. He continued his yeshiva education throughout the rest of his formative years. He has maintained a fully Torah-observant lifestyle, eventually got married, and is now, at the time of this writing, a proud father of three.

Another Personal Encounter

At a *farbrengen* on Shabbos Mishpatim, Erev Rosh Chodesh Adar 5746 (February 8, 1986), I merited another personal encounter with the Rebbe.

I'll never forget that Shabbos morning. The streets were full of snow, and I trekked with my sons and several of my family members all the way from Boro Park to Crown Heights. When I walked into 770, it was announced, "Rabbi Niyazov is here from Boro Park." It was also announced that I was making a *mesiba*, special gathering, for Bukharian Jews who came out of Russia.

The Rebbe had me give over a few words. People were surprised to hear me speak in Yiddish, not exactly the *lingua franca* among Bukharian Jews. I invited the Rebbe and the entire community to participate in a momentous occasion: the completion of my new book, *Mesiras Nefesh shel Yehudim (Self-Sacrifice of the Bukharian Jews)*. The Rebbe then handed me a bottle of vodka, explaining that this was his way of being present at the special gathering.

(This encounter has been recorded in *Toras Menachem, Mishpatim* 5746, pt. 2.)

Chapter
NINETEEN

HOMECOMING

Back in America, we continued working to help the "religious underground" of the Soviet Union. We found ways to send books, clothes, *mezuzot*, *seforim*, and *tefillin*, as well as large amounts of money to those in Samarkand working every single day to keep Yiddishkeit alive.

Then, in 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. Thousands of East Europeans marched westward to freedom. One by one their governments crumbled and Communism was dealt a mortal blow.

In 1991, with the communist government miraculously disintegrating before the world, I decided to return and visit Russia with my wife. This was shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the situation for travelers was unstable and intimidating. I first went to the Rebbe, who at the time customarily distributed "Rebbe dollars" for charity every Sunday, allowing people the chance to meet him and secure his blessings. When I told him of my plans to travel to Eretz Yisrael and, from there, to Russia, the Rebbe blessed my trip with success.

When I arrived in Moscow, my first stop after Eretz Yisrael, I stayed at the home of a fellow Chassid. That Shabbos, he invited

me to walk with him an hour-and-a-half each way to celebrate the reopening of a synagogue.

We walked the streets of Moscow decked openly in our hats, long Chassidic kapotas, and *tallisim*, prayer shawls. People stared but said nothing. The experience was surreal: having grown up under extreme religious oppression in this same land, I could not believe we could, freely and unmolested, walk the streets as proud Jews.

The next day, Sunday, while visiting the famed Marina Roscha synagogue, I met someone, a gentleman in his mid-thirties, who had not yet had a *bris*. I felt honored to serve as his *mohel*. In addition, I was asked by the congregation to serve as *sandek* for another *bris* being held in the shul that day; I immediately agreed. Again, it felt surreal to participate in a *bris* being held publicly on the very grounds where, only a few years earlier, such an act would have landed me in Siberia.

During my stay, complete strangers approached me on the street and called out, "My teacher, my teacher!" Although I did not recognize many of them, some were youngsters I had taken off the streets of Samarkand way back then to study in the clandestine *cheder*. But most were former students of my *alef-beit* videos. Years before, while in America, I had the idea of filming lessons of *alef-beit* in Russian on VHS, which were smuggled to Jews behind the Iron Curtain. Now I was coming face to face with those who had learned the Hebrew alphabet from these tapes. A truly gratifying experience.

From Moscow, I traveled to Samarkand. The Soviets had converted the main synagogue into a theater; now, with religious revival sweeping the country, the building had been deeded back to the Jewish community. I decided to sponsor, in celebration of my homecoming, a grand *farbrengen* – and an incredible crowd of over five hundred showed up!

A few days into my trip, Russia was thrown into turmoil. Hardline Communists attempted to regain control of the Soviet Union and halt Gorbachev's *perestroika* program of reforms. The coup dominated international headlines; people were certain that the Russians would revert to their old habits.





Alef-beit lessons in Russian VHS cover

My family abroad feared for my safety, but I felt secure in the knowledge that I had received the Rebbe's blessing for this trip. Nevertheless, I phoned my elderly mother – direct calls to America then were nearly impossible and prohibitively expensive – to inform her of my delayed return and to reassure her that all would be well.

I traveled to Leningrad (shortly later renamed S. Petersburg), where the airports were still closed, and waited for outbound flights to resume. Tanks and military personnel lined the streets. Once again, it felt surreal to walk in Chassidic garb in full view and not be afraid. I felt, in fact, serenely detached from the turmoil. In the end, the coup was quashed and I was able to return home safely.

Chapter
TWENTY

PEBBLES, NOT BOULDERS

In the early 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the trickle of immigrants burst into a crashing wave. About 40,000 Jews from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tadjikistan, Mongolia, and Uzbekistan — the majority from the cities of Samarkand, Tashkent, Dushanbe, Bishkek, and Kokand — have slowly transformed parts of New York City, particularly the boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn, into Bukharian enclaves.

With this influx came a huge need for leadership, guidance, and support. In addition to Rav, I was a pioneer immigrant, and along with some of the other pioneers, I was able to utilize my own experiences and connections to make their transition less burdensome.

There was so much to do all at once! Needless to say, this period of time was quite overwhelming. But of all the things I was feeling, overwhelmed wasn't one of them. Each new family brought a rush of excitement celebrating their welcome to "the other side." Also, because I was so knee deep in the many responsibilities —helping them to get settled, finding jobs for them or yeshivoth for their children, arranging programs and classes, performing *brissim,* and even hosting families at our

three-bedroom Boro Park apartment for weeks until they landed on their feet — I simply did not feel the onus that others did when observing me. I worked endlessly, juggling my jewelry business with the community and new arrivals. People showed up at my door or phoned me at all hours of the day and night. To all who needed help, I tried to be receptive.

The newcomers were eternally grateful and so humbled by all the outpouring kindness they were showered with. They felt the sincere and unconditional love I had for each of them and their hearts reflected that right back. As it is written in Mishlei 27:19, "For just as water mirrors the face to the face so does the heart of man to man." We immediately formed an unbreakable bond that carried on even after they managed to build themselves up, move out of Boro Park to achieve the "American dream," and buy their own home in the many different communities in Queens and other areas.

Baruch Hashem even though our Boro Park community was like the "Grand Central Station," to which thousands passed through, gained the tools and guidance needed to confidently navigate their way down their own path, leading them to wherever their destination might be. Of those that did remain, we formed a beautiful tight knit community that supported each other.

However, although I had a very close and warm connection with most, not everything served graciously to some had been returned in kind. We had our fair share of hecklers and rabble rousers and over the years, I often faced not only a lack of gratitude but criticism, opposition, and even public scorn. Despite the painful humiliations and betrayal of some, and the stress of it all, I kept focused on the "big picture" and swallowed my pride to keep the peace. I regarded my congregants, students, and even those that abandoned our community as one would their own child. Although disappointed, I never felt personal outrage.

Sympathetic friends and family members urged me to stand up to those select ingrates. Some even suggested, "Hey, you've done enough. Why don't you sit back and enjoy your life? Who

needs the headache?"

It would be easy to retire to some insular community, to go to sleep and forget all about the vast numbers who are drowning in our cultural morass. I understood what my supporters were saying.

But what they didn't understand: This *was* my life, my purpose, my *shlichus*. I ate, slept, and breathed my community. I thought of my grandfather, Rabbi Eliyahu Mani, who literally gave his life at an unripe age to save the diamonds in the street . . . and *I*, who enjoy so many comforts and freedoms on these adopted shores, should get offended along the way? These people *are* my diamonds!

I felt privileged to do this work, even if it meant getting my hands dirty sometimes. I knew I was saving lives, and that was all that mattered. I simply told my sympathizers not to worry, and that everything was okay—and, Baruch Hashem, it was.

All this brings me to a story from a friend of mine, who was driving the famed Israeli diplomat Yehuda Avner to the Pittsburgh International Airport.

"May I ask you something?" my friend ventured.

Mr. Avner laughed. "I knew I wouldn't be getting a ride for nothing. What do you want to ask?"

"Can you tell me something about the Lubavitcher Rebbe? Any conversation?" My friend knew that the diplomat had had quite a few private audiences with the Rebbe.

Mr. Avner pondered, then cleared his throat. "Well, there is one I don't really talk about. It's not as public as other stories."

And he began:

> It was the late 1970s. I was attending an assembly in Houston, Texas. At the time Israel was involved in rescuing Ethiopian Jews. It was very dangerous work; I myself went on a few missions. Yet, against all odds, Israel was successful.
>
> At the time, however, no one spoke about the operations. We couldn't, because of the danger. However, at the assembly I was hounded by American leaders and activists. "Why isn't Israel doing anything? Why isn't Israel trying to help Ethiopian Jews?"

Although I knew that Israel was, in fact, saving lives, I had to remain silent. Too much was at stake – navy or merchant ships, soldiers, commandos – and it wasn't something that could freely be discussed.

I tried to walk away, but these people wouldn't let up. I was called names, accused of weakness or insensitivity.

After the assembly, I went to Washington DC. Then I went to New York, to see the Rebbe. I walked into his office, feeling crushed like a midget, and lay my frustration on the Rebbe's desk.

"We're doing our jobs, saving lives!" I complained. "But I can't tell them about it. There is no peace, no mercy. They think we're wasting their dollars."

The Rebbe said to me, "Reb Yehuda, when you're dealing with saving lives, take all the negativity, all the criticism – anything you're going to suffer for. But take it all with love, because you're saving lives."

I walked in like a midget, but walked out like a giant, proud and strong.

I have kept those words as a source of encouragement, to myself and to others in similar work. Someday, I tell them, you're going to be a leader in different communities. You're going to save lives. But they're going to attack you. They're going to throw things at you, even smear campaigns.

But that's when you are going to have to mentally replay the Rebbe's golden words: *When you're saving lives, take all of it with love.* Because you know you're doing what you need to do – and that is saving lives, which is so dire.

Why do people turn on you? I'm not qualified to discuss human nature.

But a friend of mine once said: Whenever he does an extraordinary favor for someone, he then follows up by handing that person a bag of pebbles.

"What is this for?" the person asks.

My friend explained, "Well, the nature of things is when you help someone in a grandiose way, they come back and throw things at you.

"I'm asking you – when you throw something, throw pebbles, not boulders. That's how the recipient of the favor might handle things."

My friend continued, "The person doing the favor – the person in a leadership position – you, I, whoever else is out there putting his neck on the line to help people – what do you and I need to know? You're on a rescue mission to save lives.

"And when you're saving lives . . . okay, so what? They dump a little trash on you? That's okay. Why? Because a life has been saved. That is the most important thing."

Luckily, the rewards of my efforts have far outweighed the irritations, and the long-term investment in Jewish souls has reaped enormous dividends. Sometimes the evidence appeared much later, and in ways that can only be called providential.

Late one Friday, while I prepared to leave my office, a Bukharian Jew walked in.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Fine, *Baruch Hashem.*"

"How are things?"

I shot a glance at the clock. Shabbos was approaching, so this was not the time to start a lengthy conversation. Nevertheless, I decided to be patient. Perhaps this stranger had something to say that was important.

"You don't recognize me?" he asked.

"No, I'm sorry. I don't."

"You taught me *alef-beit*! You taught me everything!" the stranger exclaimed. "When you were being vetted at the army hospital, you met my father there, and you promised him to teach his children Torah once you were discharged."

I couldn't believe my ears! A rush of memories flooded through me as the visitor continued talking. The Jewish patient in the army hospital where I had stayed back when I was eighteen had three sons, to whom I had taught the Hebrew alphabet and Yiddishkeit. Since they were Kohanim, descendants of the priestly class, they had adopted the family name Kahanov.

"I recently arrived in America," my former pupil explained,

"and I just found out that you have an office here. So I decided to come by today and visit."

He hugged me repeatedly and inquired about my health. He had thought back then that I had been in the hospital for a serious medical condition.

Only now did I reveal to him that I had merely faked it in order to avoid the draft. We parted warmly and we kept in touch. Encounters like these do more than brighten my day. They remind me how we Bukharian Jews – and indeed many Soviet Jews – have triumphed over incredible challenges. Nevertheless, there are newer challenges that cannot be ignored.

We American Jews are blessed with abundant freedom and abundant lifestyle choices. But we are also bombarded with myriad distractions, material wealth, and a relentless entertainment culture. Ironically, the kindness of America might be achieving what the cruelty of the Soviet Union could not.

I often tell my children the famous parable about the sun and the wind, each of whom argued over who was more powerful. Noticing a man bundled up in a coat, the wind boasted, "Watch! I can take that coat right off of him!"

The wind blew and blew. But instead of removing his coat, the man wrapped it around him even more tightly and continued his way.

Then it was the sun's turn. It simply remained still but shone in all strength and brilliance. Eventually the man began to perspire. Finally he removed his coat and tossed it aside.

This, I fear, might happen to a people accustomed to years of an oppressive environment and now suddenly finding themselves at the extreme opposite, an overly permissive society. Instead of the brutal wind of Communism, which tested their resilience, they are basking in a gentle but far more insidious glow of the sun, which might result in their casting off roots in pursuit of Western pleasure and ambition.

Once, at a *farbrengen* at 770, I heard Rabbi Gershon Avtzon – head of Yeshiva Lubavitch of Cincinnati, where two of my grandchildren attend *mesivta*, high school – discuss parents who came

to him complaining about their children's schools. The Jewish learning seemed to be making little impact or inspiration.

The rabbi replied, "These days self-sacrifice no longer means secret meetings or Siberian gulags. It means giving up some of our creature comforts and dangerous temptations.

"Think of two altars," he continued, "one with our children, *chas veshalom,* and the other with the latest TV, computer, or smartphone. Which of the two would you be willing to give up? What can you 'trade in' for greater spirituality and a lasting heritage?"

Parents need to remember that they are their children's role models. Our children are learning from us and watching our every move. To truly impact our children in the way of Torah and mitzvoth, we ourselves must be their living example.

Standing up to an aggressively secular environment, to set firm limits and religious priorities, and above all to establish a family devoted to Torah and mitzvoth – all this is our current act of "defiance." The lure of the outside world is our current trial. Bukharian Jews may have left behind the geographic Samarkand, but they must retain its lessons and legacies.

Looking back, I thank the Almighty for all the achievements and even for all the growing pains. Looking ahead, I am reminded of what still needs to be done by all of us involved in outreach and education. The work is massive and the appreciation often proportionately small.

Nevertheless, we know that our efforts are crucial and worthwhile. So I, along with my family, friends, relatives, and fellow rabbis, carry on like soldiers, keeping in mind that in the end, we are committed to saving lives – spiritual lives of those lost to their heritage or those simply struggling to find a lifeline, a calm and steady anchor in today's turbulent sea.

It is our hope that our efforts will bear the ultimate fruit and bring the *geulah,* redemption, for all Jews—may it be speedily in our days!

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ר' **אליהו מני (ג'ורא) וברוכה**

ניאזוב

נפטר כ"ו תשרי ה'תשע"ח

ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

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ולעילוי נשמת

האשה החשובה

מרת **רבקה (ריבא)** בת הרה"ח בעל מס"נ

גבריאל (אצ'לדי) וחנה איסתם

ניאזוב

נפטרה כ' אדר א' ה'תשע"ד

ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

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ולעילוי נשמת

ר' **פנחס**

בן ר' **אבוחי וצביה**

יגודייב

נפטר כ"ו ניסן ה'תשמ"ט

ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

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יעקובוב

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