Along the Path of *Freedom*

עַל כַּנְפֵי נְשָׁרִים

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Chassidic Tales & Teachings
For Nissan and Pesach

Chaim Davies

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שנת הַנּוֹתֵ״ן בַּ״ם דָּ״ךְ לפ״ק

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Nissan

נִיסָן

Opening Days of Nissan

A Month of Redemption

1. Hispaalus? Mochin!

On the last Shabbos of the Rebbe Rashab's life, his condition had become critical. Reb Moshe Dovber Rivkin, who was attending him, later recorded what he saw during those hours.

Toward five in the afternoon, Rivkin stepped out briefly. He was called back when another attendant saw a startling change in the Rebbe's face. It seemed aflame, and his eyes had an intensity that made those standing near him tremble.

The physicians remained beside the bed, watching his pulse and doing whatever they could. They had not told the household the full gravity of his condition. Later they said that for much of the day his pulse had scarcely been perceptible and that the injections had eventually ceased to help.

As evening approached, the chassidim gathered in the large room on the other side of the building, where the minyan ordinarily prayed. They did not crowd into the Rebbe's living quarters. They recited Tehillim and pleaded for his life. At nightfall, the physicians ordered bottles of hot water to be prepared to warm his feet.

Dr. Landau arrived and conferred with members of the household. In his judgment there was no longer hope by natural means. Perhaps the Rebbe's only son, Reb Yosef

replacing the hot-water bottles. Another specialist was brought to administer an infusion. A catheter was also used. Afterward, the Rebbe moved his lips and gestured, but those present could not understand him. Someone suggested that he wished to wash his hands, and a little water was brought to moisten them.

The Rebbetzin asked whether he would like milk or coffee. He indicated coffee. She brought it, and they heard words from Havdalah as his lips moved. She gave him a little to drink with a spoon. Rivkin recalled that the Alter Rebbe, too, had made Havdalah over coffee before passing away on Motzaei Shabbos.

The Rebbe continued moving his lips. His son later told Rivkin that he had heard the words "Ve'ahavtem es Hashem Elokeichem." Rivkin himself had not heard them clearly.

Most of the time, the Rebbe's eyes were closed. His breathing was labored and accompanied by painful sighs. Those in the minyan continued praying and weeping. They added the name Chaim.

They also formed a beis din of three, before whom anyone who wished could formally give a portion of his own remaining years to the Rebbe. Each person offered half a year. Rivkin was among them.

The Rebbetzin came forward, weeping, and offered ten years. The beis din would accept only half a year or a year, but she insisted. Finally, they accepted her declaration for two years. This took place around midnight or one o'clock. The Tehillim did not cease.

For a little while, Reb Yosef Yitzchak stood in the passage near the stairs, bent in thought, praying or reciting Tehillim and weeping. He sang the Alter Rebbe's niggun that his father used during the Days of Awe. Then he returned to the bedside and called his daughters into the room so that their grandfather could see them.

At about two or three in the morning, the Rebbe began to raise one hand and move his lips. His son understood that

he wished to bless him and bent his head farther, bringing it beneath his father's hand.

"Father, the children are here," he said. "Chana, Mushka, Sheindel."

The girls leaned toward their grandfather one after another. He looked at them and moved his lips, but the others could not hear what he said.

Reb Yosef Yitzchak then asked everyone else to leave the room, including the doctors. Rivkin did not witness what followed. He learned it afterward from the son and granddaughters.

Chana stood before her grandfather first. He looked closely at her and began raising his hand. Her father supported it above her head, as he had done when blessing them on Erev Yom Kippur. They heard the words of Yevarechecha and her name, together with other words that they could not distinguish. He blessed Mushka and Sheindel in the same way, naming each of them.

Then he placed both hands on his son's head and blessed him. Reb Yosef Yitzchak told Rivkin that he had heard, among the words, "May Hashem his G-d be with him, and let him ascend." Rivkin believed that the son had heard more, but did not wish to reveal it; he did not attempt to supply those undisclosed words.

The son called in one of the yeshivah students, Reb Shemaryahu Gourary, whom the Rebbe also blessed with his hands upon his head. He would later become Reb Yosef Yitzchak's son-in-law; at that time, Rivkin notes, the match had not yet been arranged.

The doctors and the other attendants returned.

During those hours, Reb Yosef Yitzchak once went into the adjoining room and sat on a bench, weeping and chanting what sounded like a prayer. Rivkin also entered to sit down for a moment. The son rose, walked about, then seized Rivkin by both shoulders.

"Berel, our hearts are made of stone!" he cried. After weeping further, he asked, "Berel, what do you say?"

Rivkin did not know how to answer. He said only that Hashem Himself could still help. The son immediately returned to his father.

Several times the Rebbe's breathing weakened almost to a stop. Each time, his son cried, "Father! Father!" The Rebbe opened his eyes and looked at him, and the physicians administered another injection.

As four o'clock approached, all could see that the final moments had come. At another cry of "Father," the Rebbe opened his eyes and appeared to smile. The injections had stopped. He closed his eyes and continued breathing with difficulty.

Once more his son called to him. He opened his eyes, looked at him, and shed two tears. His eyes closed again, and his breathing grew fainter. He moved his hands and feet and turned his face upward; until then he had been lying somewhat toward the side where his son and the attendants stood. His face contracted, and the breathing ceased.

Those around him cried Shema Yisrael. Candles were lit, and the physicians and several attendants checked for breath with a feather. His face was covered. It was the early morning of 2 Nissan 5680.

They sought men who had immersed that day to lower his body from the bed to the floor. They covered him with two of his Shabbos silk garments, while the students and chassidim recited Tehillim. Many went to immerse and returned to continue.

Members of the chevra kadisha and several chassidim went to choose a burial place. The son was brought to see it and give his agreement. Meanwhile, word spread through Rostov, and people began arriving in large numbers.

The Rebbetzin and her son gave the keys to an elder chassid to search among the writings for a will and any instructions about the burial. In the first drawer they

opened in the writing table, they found the will ready, together with a separate note for the son. There were no instructions there concerning the arrangements for the body.

The manuscripts and other papers were gathered from the cupboards and boxes and taken downstairs to Reb Yosef Yitzchak's study.

Source: R. Moshe Dovber Rivkin, *Ashkavta DeRebbi*, pp. 95–100.

2. But I Will Not Forget

A tradition about the passing of the Apter Rebbe tells of a knock heard in Tiberias on the night he died.

The knocking came at the windows of the meeting house of Kollel Volhynia.

"Come out to accompany the Rebbe of Apta!" a voice called.

Those who went outside made their way toward the shore. There, the account relates, they saw thousands of souls accompanying the Rebbe's bier.

They followed the procession to the cemetery. They saw his face in the grave, and then left.

In the morning, they told what they had seen. The others would not believe them. No one else knew anything of such a funeral.

A sage instructed that the place be examined. Those who went found that the earth at the spot had been newly disturbed.

Only afterward did word arrive that the Apter Rebbe had passed away on that very day.

Before his passing, the Rebbe had cried bitterly over the length of the exile and the delay in Mashiach's coming.

He spoke of R. Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev.

Before leaving this world, the Berditchever had declared that when he reached the world above, he would neither

rest nor be silent. He would give the holy tzaddikim no rest until Mashiach came.

But when he arrived, the Apter said, they occupied him with the delights of the heavenly chambers and their exalted levels, until he forgot what he had intended to do.

"But I," said the Apter Rebbe, "will not forget."

Source: Yisrael Berger, *Eser Orot* (Piotrkow, 1906), p. 116; Binyamin Mintz, Sefer HaHistalkus (1930), entry for R. Avraham Yehoshua Heshel.

3. Lema'an Yirbu Yemeichem

At the beginning of Nissan 5626, the Tzemach Tzedek became very weak.

The physician of Lubavitch was called. After examining him, he said that he could detect nothing to explain the change. The following day, however, the Rebbe's condition grew worse.

The chassidim were deeply alarmed. They recited Tehillim throughout the day, and the name Meir was added to his name.

Toward evening on the twelfth of Nissan, word spread that his condition had improved. The improvement did not last. Soon those attending him again feared that there was no hope.

His attendant, R. Chaim Ber, bent close and placed his ear near the Rebbe's mouth.

He heard the words, "Lema'an yirbu yemeichem"—"So that your days may be multiplied."

By eleven that night, those around him saw that there was nothing more they could do. His bed stood in the middle of the room. The people gathered around it held burning candles.

The Tzemach Tzedek lay without moving, looking at those who stood before him.

At half past midnight, on the thirteenth of Nissan, he passed away.

Afterward, the Maharash told the chassidim that his father had not died. Whoever wished to ask for something could still make his request.

"I, too, have made a request," he said.

Source: Anash.org, citing R. Zalman Ber of Beshenkovitz

Blessing the Trees

Birkas HaIlanos

4. The Fruit Trees Behind the Fence

As a young man, Reb Aharon of Karlin was called "Aharon the madman" by people who did not understand his conduct. Reb Mordechai Chaim of Slonim preserved three incidents associated with that nickname. One concerned Birkat HaIlanot.

Reb Aharon wanted to recite the blessing over flowering trees, but could find suitable trees only in the garden of the town's priest. The garden was fenced in. He climbed over the fence.

When the priest saw him, he became furious. Frightened, Reb Aharon jumped back over the fence, and his head covering fell off.

Rather than walk four cubits with his head uncovered, he pulled his garment over his head and ran through the town that way. People laughed at him for his determination not to go bareheaded.

That conduct, the Slonim tradition relates, was one of the reasons people gave him the name they meant as an insult.

Source: R. Mordechai Chaim of Slonim's tradition in Mizkenim Esbonan, as quoted in the Gal Einai lesson 'R. Aharon HaGadol miKarlin, ' subsection 'Birkat HaIlanot.'

5. The Apples That Came Back in the Fall

As a boy, R. Levi Yitzchak Horowitz accompanied his father, R. Pinchas Dovid, the first Bostoner Rebbe, when he went to recite Birkat HaIlanot. There were no fruit trees in their own neighborhood, so his father would send people to find a suitable place where his family and chassidim could make the annual blessing.

One year they drove to Allston, then a new and green area. They stopped before a house with a large piece of land and what appeared to be fruit trees growing behind a tall fence. One of the drivers, Mr. Israel Sachs, went to ask permission to enter.

The man of the house was out. His wife, an Italian Catholic, welcomed the request and allowed them into the garden. The Rebbe got out of the car and entered the gate, followed by his chassidim. They recited the blessing and prepared to leave.

When Mr. Sachs thanked their hostess, she asked whether the Grand Rabbi would do her a special favor. She pointed to an apple tree in a corner of the yard. It had once produced very good apples, but for the last few years it had produced none. Since the Rabbi had blessed the other trees, she wondered whether he would bless that one as well.

Mr. Sachs translated her request into Yiddish. R. Pinchas Dovid agreed. Turning toward the tree, he said in Hebrew, "May this tree bring forth good fruits."

That fall, the Rebbe had a new gabbai. One day the gabbai came upstairs with a report: a woman had left a large basket of bright-red apples for him. She had also left a message. Every apple in the basket, she said, had come from the barren tree he had blessed.

Source: R. Levi Yitzchak Horowitz's childhood recollection, reproduced by Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin in "Blessing Hashem for the Freedom of Spring," citing And the Angels Laughed, pp. 29–32.

6. He Went Back for the Siddur

One day in Nissan, the Lubavitcher Rebbe left his room at 770 and was walking toward the car to go home. He stopped opposite the tree outside and looked at it. Then he turned back, went into his room, took out a siddur, and recited Birkat HaIlanot.

Reb Leibel Groner later related the incident to Reb Shimon Eisenbach. In discussing the apparent difficulty of a tree understood to be ornamental rather than fruit-bearing, Groner pointed to the Alter Rebbe's wording in *Seder Birkas HaNehenin*: a person who goes out in Nissan and sees trees putting forth flowers should bless. It did not, he observed, expressly say "fruit trees." He suggested that this might explain what the Rebbe had done.

Eisenbach later revisited his report. Readers had identified the tree as a fruit-bearing tree, including a report that it was a cherry tree, and he acknowledged their correction. The premise that it was merely ornamental was therefore not established; Groner's suggested explanation was not a ruling by the Rebbe permitting the blessing over ornamental trees.

Source: R. Shimon Eisenbach, "מה הרבי רוצה ' :כשהרב חפר צעד על השדרה ושאל ממני?'", "Sippurim MiKeli Rishon", chapter 46, COL, 30 Nissan 5780 / 24 April 2020. The author's essential follow-up is " מדוע הרבי הורה להפסיק את שירת מרדכי בן דוד בפאראד", chapter 47, 7 Iyyar 5780 / 1 May 2020.

Shabbos HaGadol

The Shabbos Before Pesach

7. The Bear Outside the Judge's House

On the Shabbos before Pesach, the Baal Shem Tov removed his tallis after Shacharis and went outside. The people thought he had left for an ordinary bodily need.

In the synagogue courtyard he saw a bear being led along, with children running after it. He followed too.

The bear was taken past the courtyard gate and into the marketplace. Still the Baal Shem Tov followed. The people wondered at his behavior.

Opposite the judge's house, the bear broke its rope and began behaving wildly. Those following it fled, afraid that it would run through the town and hurt people.

The Baal Shem Tov remained where he was.

The bear ran into the judge's courtyard, entered the vestibule, and forced open the door of the house. The Baal Shem Tov stood at a window to see what it would do. Other people also gathered at the windows.

Inside, the bear moved a table, lifted the flooring, and dug into the ground beneath it. There it uncovered the hidden body of a person described by the source as a mamzer—one born of a forbidden union. It raised the body in its two forepaws where everyone could see it.

"You are witnesses!" the Baal Shem Tov called out in Polish, publicly registering his protest.

The judge had intended to use the body to bring a false accusation against the Jews. Now its hiding place had been exposed before the assembled onlookers.

The Baal Shem Tov returned to the synagogue to complete the prayers.

Source: R. Dov Ber ben Shmuel of Linits, *Shivchei HaBesht*, §174.

8. Half the Derashah Had Succeeded

Reb Naftali of Ropshitz returned home exhausted from his Shabbos HaGadol derashah.

His wife asked why he was so tired.

He had labored hard, he told her, speaking about the poor and their many needs for the approaching festival. Matzos and the other necessities of Pesach were particularly expensive.

"Did your derashah at least accomplish something?" she asked.

"Half of it," he answered. "The poor are ready to receive. As for the other half—whether the rich will give—I do not yet know."

Source: R. Avraham Chaim Simcha Bunim Michelsohn, Ohel Naftali, Lemberg, B. Z. Zeidman and Y. Z. Ausschnitt, תרע"א/1911, p. 41.

9. The Rebbe Said "Go'el Yisrael"

A Jewish tenant lived in a village near Kolbasov, where he leased the tavern from the local landowner. His business had gone badly, and he could not pay the rent when it fell due. The landowner repeatedly sent for his money and threatened him, but the tenant still had nothing with which to pay.

On Shabbos HaGadol, the landowner sent his Cossacks to punish him by wrecking his home. They emptied the slop vessel onto the floor, took the cholent from the oven and threw it outside, overturned and broke the tables and benches, and trampled whatever came within reach.

After they left, the tenant and his family sat amid the destruction. Hoping to find some relief from his distress, he walked into town to hear the Shabbos HaGadol derashah.

The rav of Kolbasov was then Reb Avraham Yehoshua Heshel, later known as the Apter Rav, the author of *Ohev Yisrael*. When the tenant entered the shul, the rav was already speaking and the congregation stood crowded around him. The man found a corner near the entrance and listened.

The rav explained that there are two blessings: "Ga'al Yisrael," in the past tense, and "Go'el Yisrael," in the present. The first, said after Shema and in the Haggadah, refers to the redemption from Egypt. The second, in the Amidah, concerns the redemption that Hashem brings at all times.

Even if a Jew lived in a village, the rav continued, and had no money to pay his rent; even if the landowner sent Cossacks to destroy his home and they wrecked everything they found—Hashem could provide redemption for that Jew too.

The tenant left filled with joy. On his way home he danced and sang, repeating, "The Rebbe said, 'Go'el Yisrael!' The Rebbe said, 'Go'el Yisrael!'"

Toward evening the landowner sent his men back to see what the tenant was doing after the devastation. They found him dancing and singing. They returned with the report that his troubles appeared to have driven him out of his mind.

That evening the landowner summoned him. The tenant first thought that another punishment awaited him. Then he remembered the rav's words and went without fear, still joyful.

"Why are you such a failure, Moshke?" the landowner asked. "You yourself are poor, and you cannot pay me either."

"What can I do, my lord?" the tenant replied.

The landowner offered him a way forward. He would give him a note to the town distillery, authorizing him to obtain spirits on credit. He could sell them at a profit, repeat the transaction several times, and earn enough both to pay the debt and to support his household.

The tenant followed the proposal. During the few days between Shabbos HaGadol and Erev Pesach, he bought and sold several consignments and made a substantial profit. He paid the rent and purchased the family's festival needs with money to spare.

On Erev Pesach he wrapped a sum of money in a kerchief and brought it to the rav of Kolbasov.

"I have brought the Rebbe the money for 'Go'el Yisrael,'" he said.

Source: R. Shlomo Yosef Zevin, Sippurei Chassidim LaMoadim, 2001 edition, pp. 277–278.

10. The Cry He Had Heard in the Derashah

A Jewish innkeeper owed rent to the landowner from whom he leased his business. The payment fell due during Pesach, and he had no money. A warning from the landowner left him afraid for his life.

He set out on foot to seek the help of Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heshel of Apta. By the time he reached the town, on the eve of Shabbos HaGadol, his clothes and shoes were covered with mud. The attendant would not admit him before Shabbos, so he remained in Apta.

On Shabbos afternoon he heard the Rebbe's derashah. At first he understood none of it. Then the Rebbe began speaking about the Haggadah. At Vanitzak, "We cried out," he spoke in Yiddish, which the innkeeper understood.

The Rebbe explained that the crying out of the Exodus was not confined to the past. On Seder night, a Jew in distress could cry to Hashem for deliverance. He spoke of people needing children or a livelihood, people imprisoned or threatened with imprisonment, and tenants unable to pay their landlords.

The innkeeper believed he had heard the instruction he needed. After Shabbos he returned home. When he and his wife reached Vanitzak at their Seder, he told her that this was the moment to cry out. They continued calling to Hashem until a knock at the window interrupted them.

Outside stood a non-Jewish acquaintance carrying two barrels. He said that, while drunk, he had killed his wife and was fleeing. The barrels contained gold coins. Having seen the light in their house, he had come to leave them there. If he returned, he would take one barrel; the other would be theirs as a gift.

During Chol HaMoed the innkeeper paid his entire debt. The landowner received him favorably and told him that, as a trustworthy tenant, he could retain the lease permanently.

After the festival, the innkeeper and his family bought proper clothing and shoes, as well as animals. He returned to Apta to thank the Rebbe.

The Rebbe told him that the thanks did not belong to him: the innkeeper had drawn the deliverance upon himself when he cried out at Vanitzak.

Source: The Saraf of Mogielnica's account of his rebbe, the Ohev Yisrael, in She'eiris Yisrael, p. 208, as cited in Toras HaSaraf MiMogielnica and quoted by R. Elimelech Biderman, Be'er HaParashah—Pesach, pp. 22–23, note 43. The quotation was consulted; the earlier book pages were not independently inspected.

11. Why Will You Not Tell Me the Truth?

During the Minchas Elazar's final illness in 5697, he was staying in Pest. A return home before Pesach had been contemplated, and notices for his Shabbos HaGadol derashah had already been prepared. His worsening condition prevented the plan from proceeding.

On Friday, Parashas Tzav, Reb Chaim Elazar Shapira rose from his bed with urgency to put on his Shabbos clothes and join the public prayers. But the illness left him terribly weak. At the Friday-night meal he could do little more than taste the food.