At the Break of *Dawn*

אַיֶּלֶת הַשַּׁחַר

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Chassidic Tales & Teachings
For Shevat and Adar

Chaim Davies

Tishrei 5787

שנת וַתִּלָּקַח אֶסְתֵּ״ר אֶ״ל הַמֶּלֶ״ךְ לפ״ק

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Shevat

שְׁבָט

Chodesh Shevat

A Month of Renewal

1. The Parable Before the Kiddush Cup Fell

On Friday night, the first day of Rosh Chodesh Shevat 5572, Rabbi Natan Neta Tenenboim-Braude of Chełm took the cup in his hand to recite Kiddush.

Before making the blessing, he told a parable.

A king once sailed on a ship with his ministers and servants. The ship was so heavily loaded that it began to sink. The passengers cast lots to decide whom they should throw into the sea to lighten the vessel.

The lot fell upon the king himself.

They cast the king into the depths of the sea.

As Rabbi Natan Neta finished the parable, the Kiddush cup slipped from his hand, and his soul departed at that moment. He was buried in Chełm.

Source: *Zichron Raizel—Yahrtzeits of Shevat 5783*, Chełm, p. 3.

2. The Glass That Broke Before the Last Writing Session

On 1 Shevat 5731, Rabbi Moshe Yechiel HaLevi Epstein of Ozharov was in his room preparing for his regular nighttime writing session.

Those outside suddenly heard glass shatter.

They rushed in and found the Rebbe still standing but unconscious. The floor was covered with shards.

He was taken to a hospital. Doctors diagnosed a massive cerebral hemorrhage. First aid was attempted and did not reverse his condition.

Minutes before his death, the biographical account says, he raised his hand, straightened his beard and peyos, and folded his hands over his chest. He then returned his soul to his Maker.

Source: M. Shapiro, "The Ozharover Rebbe—Part 2" (first published 1996).

3. "I Have Never Had Anything Bad"

Reb Zusha of Anipoli's yahrtzeit falls on 2 Shevat. Among the stories told of him is an encounter with two brothers, Reb Shmelke of Nikolsburg and Reb Pinchas Horowitz, the Haflaah.

The brothers went to their Rebbe, the Maggid of Mezritch, with a question.

Chazal teach that a person must bless Hashem for the bad just as he blesses Him for the good. How could a person receive suffering with joy?

The Maggid directed them to the beis midrash.

"There is someone there named Reb Zusha, smoking his pipe. He will explain the Mishnah to you."

They went to the beis midrash and told Reb Zusha that the Maggid had sent them to ask him.

Reb Zusha answered with a laugh.

"It is a wonder to me that he told you to ask me. Is this a question to ask someone who has never had anything bad—not even for a moment? From the day I was born, I have had every good thing. You must ask someone who, chas veshalom, has had something bad."

The brothers knew how Reb Zusha lived. He was desperately poor and afflicted, and had been so throughout his life.

From his answer they understood: one who receives everything with love does not feel that anything bad has befallen him.

Source: Moshe Menachem Mendel Walden, *Niflaos HaRebbe* (Piotrków: Natan Neta Kronenberg, 5671/1911), pp. 7–8, as transcribed by Agadah/Zusha, 'Eich Mevarchim Al HaRaah'.

4. The Captive-Souls' Redeemer

On Wednesday, 4 Shevat 5567, a bris was to be held in the family of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. The child was his grandson, a son of his son-in-law Rabbi Yosef Bunim Ginz.

The Berditchever ordinarily came to a bris before beginning his own prayer. His davening could continue until the end of the day, and so a circumcision could not wait until after it. This morning, however, he remained behind his closed door.

An hour passed, and then another. The child's father knocked several times, but Rabbi Levi Yitzchak did not emerge. Only at ten in the morning did the door open and the Berditchever come to the bris.

During the blessings he gave the child the name Moshe Leib.

At the seudas mitzvah, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak explained why he had delayed.

Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov, he said, had died that day. When the Sassover's soul rose above, he ran immediately into Gehinnom. He declared that he would not leave until the Jewish souls imprisoned there were released with him.

"I occupied myself with redeeming captives below," the Sassover said, according to the heavenly account, "and I shall occupy myself now with redeeming captives."

A great tumult arose. They pleaded with him to leave, but he refused. The matter was brought before the Holy One, blessed be He.

The judgment was that the Sassover could bring out a number of souls corresponding to those whom he had repaired in the lower world, together with all the souls destined to descend from them until the end of the generations. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak said that permission was given for sixty thousand souls.

The Sassover led them out. As he did, he gathered several hundred additional souls and took them along.

"All this was taking place during the morning," the Berditchever concluded. "I did not wish to leave until I saw Rabbi Moshe Leib come out of Gehinnom and the entire matter settled in peace."

The name at the bris now carried the meaning of the delay.

Source: Tradition attributed to the Minchas Elazar of Munkács, in R. Shimon Spitzer's Sassov booklet, p. 4; R. Yisrael Yaakov Klapholtz, *Sippurei Beis Din Shel Ma'alah*, p. 120.

5. "There Are Decrees upon Israel"

R. Tzion Shitrit had been married for years without children. Family members pressed him to undergo medical testing. He went to a doctor.

When he next came to the Baba Sali, Rabbi Yisrael Abuchatzeira, the Baba Sali rebuked him for placing his reliance on physicians and promised that a child would yet be born to him.

Years later, on the Baba Sali's final Shabbos—Shabbos Parashas Bo—circumstances left R. Tzion at his bedside in Internal Ward D of the hospital.

Baba Baruch and the gabbai R. Eliyahu Alfasi were supposed to arrive before Shabbos, but technical difficulties delayed them. R. Tzion remained with the Baba Sali and the two Rebbetzins, Lalla Simi and Lalla Miriam.

The Baba Sali lay connected to a feeding tube. The Rebbetzins told R. Tzion not to close his eyes but to remain alert and guard him throughout Shabbos.

R. Tzion led the prayers aloud at the bedside: Minchah, Kabbalas Shabbos, Shir HaShirim, Kiddush, and the rest of the service. He says the Baba Sali told him that the sweetness of his chant gave him pleasure.

On Friday night the Baba Sali motioned with his hand for R. Tzion to bring his ear close.

"I want to tell you two things," he said.

"First: this year you will be remembered with a male child."

Then the Baba Sali told him that he was departing as an atonement for Klal Yisrael because severe decrees hung over the Jewish people.

R. Tzion says the Baba Sali did not tell him this only once or twice. He repeated it through Friday night, Shabbos morning, and the day.

R. Tzion protested in Moroccan Arabic: why should the tzaddik go? Let the enemies of Israel go in his place.

"No," the Baba Sali answered. "There are decrees. This is how it must be."

R. Tzion remained through Havdalah. Only afterward did Baba Baruch and R. Eliyahu Alfasi arrive. R. Tzion took leave of the Baba Sali.

The following morning he was told that the Baba Sali had died at 7:35.

Within the year, a son was born to R. Tzion.

He named him Yosef Yisrael: Yosef for his grandfather R. Yosef Gabbai, who had served as chief rabbi of Maalot-Tarshiha, and Yisrael for the Baba Sali. He joined the two names through the verse, "Now Yisrael loved Yosef."

Source: R. Tzion Shitrit, first-person video testimony: infertility context 06:56–07:52; bedside vigil 09:05–11:35; birth and naming 13:45–14:20. The 7:35 death time was reported to him after he had left.

6. He Came to Raise Him—and Arrived Too Late

In Shevat 5665, word reached Sochatchov that Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, the Sfas Emes of Gur, lay gravely ill. Rabbi Avraham Bornstein, the Avnei Nezer, set out for Gur. Among those traveling with him was his disciple Rabbi Michael Eliezer HaKohen Forshlager, who later related what he saw and heard.

The Avnei Nezer entered the journey with a definite purpose. The Gemara tells of a sage who visited another in illness, gave him his hand, and raised him from the sickbed. According to Forshlager's account, the Avnei Nezer had acted in this way several times during his life. He intended to do so now for the Sfas Emes.

Throughout the road to Gur, the Avnei Nezer sat sunk in thought. People approached to greet him and offered their hands for *shalom aleichem*, but he would not extend his own. He was keeping that hand apart for the act he hoped to perform.

The travelers reached Gur, but before they entered the Sfas Emes's house, the Sfas Emes died. The hand the Avnei Nezer had kept ready was never placed in his.

On the return journey the Avnei Nezer spoke about the completion of a person's work in this world.

A tzaddik who serves his Creator until he reaches the purpose of his perfection, he said, departs from the world. He then spoke of Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz, the Hafla'ah. The Hafla'ah had been an eminent disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch. Yet he left his former surroundings, traveled to Germany, and settled in Frankfurt among people very different from those among whom he had begun. The Avnei Nezer explained that the Hafla'ah had said he had already completed his original work in this world. By beginning another course among the Jews of Frankfurt, he found a new work through which he could continue living. The Maggid of Kozhnitz, the Avnei Nezer added, had likewise found a new undertaking and mission.

The Sfas Emes had completed the work appointed to him. The Avnei Nezer had come prepared to raise him, but there was no unfinished mission through which to hold him here.

Source: R. Michael Eliezer Forshlager, a participant, as recorded by Ben-Zion Bergman, *Mikhael be-Achat* (2014), p. 40, and quoted in *Alon Mechubbarim* 194, p. 1.

7. The Citation He Could Not Leave Uncorrected

On Rosh Chodesh Shevat 5686, Rabbi Chaim Tzvi Teitelbaum, the Atzei Chaim of Sighet, was traveling to collect money for his new beis midrash. He was in Kleinwardein.

On Monday, before preparing for Minchah, people came with a question in the laws of a synagogue.

He answered and said that the ruling appeared in a particular section of the Shulchan Aruch.

Then he remembered that the law was recorded in a different section.

The court account says that his heart broke within him over the mistake and that he became deeply distressed.

Before Minchah he fainted and fell. He struck his head and suffered a *blut-shturtz*, a cerebral hemorrhage.

He did not recover. On Thursday, 6 Shevat, he died in Kleinwardein. His coffin was taken back to Sighet, the city of his rabbinate, where he was buried.

Source: *Zichron Raizel—Yahrtzeits of Shevat 5783*, p. 12.

8. The Last Postcard Reached Her

Rabbi Nathan David Rabinowitz of Parczew sent his mother, the righteous Rebbetzin of Biala, a card every Sunday.

On it he asked after her welfare and wished her *Shabbata tava*. By the time the card reached her, it was Friday.

When he became ill and felt that his end was approaching, his mother was still alive. He did not want her to learn of his death suddenly and be caused pain.

He therefore prepared many cards and instructed that after his death others should continue mailing them to her.

The oral account says that in the week when the final prepared card was sent, his mother died.

Source: A recorder identifying himself as "Itshe Tveryaner," reporting what he heard from Rabbi Nathan David's grandson, the Dinov Rebbe.

9. The Coat He Said He Would Remove

The Rebbe of Chortkov, Rabbi David Moshe, once asked R. Alter of Wolbrom, a descendant of Rabbi David of Lelov, why the Chozeh of Lublin had become displeased with Rabbi David.

R. Alter answered with what he had heard elder Chassidim say.

The Chozeh, they related, experienced distress when people began traveling to his disciples as Rebbes in their own right.

"At our advanced age," he once said, "we are not accustomed to still having to travel in order to teach our students."

The difficulty was aggravated by denunciations brought against the Chozeh's disciples. According to the card, many came from two Lublin Chassidim known as Berl and Ksil. Ksil is glossed as Yekutiel. A great Rebbe was said to have applied to them the verse, "A brutish man—*ish ba'ar*—does not know, and a fool—*khesil*—does not understand this," from which their nicknames were drawn.

After the two men spoke against Rabbi David of Lelov, Rabbi David tried to answer the accusations before the Chozeh.

He saw that his defense was not succeeding.

"If so," he cried, "Dovid'l is going home and taking off the coat."

He returned to Lelov. Several months later he died, on 7 Shevat.

Source: Friedman Project Hebrew corpus, pp. 113 and 126; short card from the Sanzer Rebbe, longer chain through R. Alter of Wolbrom to R. David Moshe of Chortkov; cf. Y. Alfasi, *HaChozeh MiLublin*, p. 93.

Yud Shevat

Yahrzeit of the Frierdiker Rebbe

10. "Save Me!" on the Last Morning

On Shabbos morning, 10 Shevat 5710, the nurse attending Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn entered his private study and found him with his head lowered over the table. She could not rouse him.

She hurried to the third floor and alerted his eldest daughter. Sholom Ber Eichhorn, who was staying in the house, was sent to fetch Dr. Avraham Abba Zeligson, who lived nearby.

Dr. Zeligson arrived at approximately 7:45. He instructed those present to move the Frierdiker Rebbe from the study into the bedroom and place him on the bed. He attempted to stabilize him.

Near the end, the Rebbe raised himself slightly and cried twice in Yiddish:

"*Rattevet mir! Rattevet mir!*—Save me! Save me!"

He lay back, and the passing followed within moments.

Three men were at the bedside: Sholom Ber Eichhorn, a kohen; Rabbi Shmuel Levitin, a Levi; and Dr. Zeligson, a Yisrael. The future Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, later drew attention to that representation of the three divisions of the Jewish people.

Rabbi Levitin sent someone to summon Rabbi Menachem Mendel from his home. After arriving, he

directed that nearby Chassidim be informed. Rabbi Yehuda Leib Groner and the other young men lived about half an hour's walk away. When the report reached Rabbi Mentlik, he refused at first to accept it.

"This cannot be," he said. "There must certainly be some mistake."

He also asked that his father, whose health was fragile and whose attachment to the Frierdiker Rebbe was deep, not be told immediately.

The young men hurried to 770. The expressions on the faces inside told them that there had been no mistake. Groner, who already worked for Rabbi Menachem Mendel, was instructed to remain nearby and be ready for any task.

At about two in the afternoon, Rabbi Menachem Mendel asked Groner to call Dr. Zeligson. The doctor was not downstairs. Groner therefore summoned Dr. Ness and told him that the Ramash wished to see him.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel entered the bedroom with Dr. Ness and sent Groner out. He had observed what appeared to be movement in the Frierdiker Rebbe's body and feared that the determination of death might have been mistaken.

Dr. Ness examined the heart again. He said there was no doubt that death had occurred. The movement, he explained, came from air remaining in the body for several hours afterward.

"The Ramash refuses to believe that his father-in-law has passed away," Dr. Ness said after leaving.

About two hours later, Rabbi Menachem Mendel took his brother-in-law, Rabbi Shemaryahu Gourary—the Rashag—by the arm. For roughly half an hour they walked silently back and forth along the second-floor hallway. No one was near enough to hear them, yet they did not speak.

During the Shabbos prayers, Rabbi Menachem Mendel remained upstairs. He told Groner to summon him when the minyan below reached Mourner's Kaddish. Throughout Shabbos he was not seen weeping publicly.

After the final Kaddish on Motzaei Shabbos, he walked from the small beis midrash toward the elevator. There he stopped and broke into loud, wrenching sobs.

He summoned the secretary Rabbi Moshe Leib Rodstein and instructed him to notify Anash around the world. The Chevra Kadisha was to determine the funeral time and notify Chassidim in distant cities who could attend. Chassidim themselves, not non-Jewish cemetery workers, were to dig the grave. The coffin was to be made from the Frierdiker Rebbe's shtender.

At the request of Rebbetzin Nechama Dina, the body was moved that night from the bedroom back into the private study. Elder Chassidim performed the taharah. The coffin was placed on two benches. Members of the family and elder Chassidim stood around it while people entered through one hallway door, asked forgiveness, and left through the other.

When the funeral began, Rabbi Menachem Mendel at first watched from the second-floor window of Rebbetzin Shterna Sarah's room. When the coffin neared Brooklyn Avenue, he came downstairs and joined it. The Rashag wanted to walk as far as the Bedford Avenue yeshivah, but police said the crowd made that impossible. Rabbi Menachem Mendel ruled that they should drive.

The Frierdiker Rebbe's silk Shabbos sirtuk had been placed on the coffin. As the coffin was lowered, the garment disappeared.

"Where is the shvartzer's garment?" Rabbi Menachem Mendel demanded.

He would not allow the burial to be completed until it was found. The sirtuk reappeared and was returned to the coffin.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel and the Rashag recited Kaddish. Rabbi Menachem Mendel tore his garment. When they returned to 770, he told the assembled Chassidim to tear their garments and sit in mourning for one hour. The

following day he directed them to mend the tears. He himself kept his garment torn through the end of shivah.

Then he said to Groner:

"From now on, you will have a completely different kind of work."

Source: R. Yehuda Leib Groner, "Historical Revelations about the Moments of the Histalkus".

11. At Ten-Forty, the Maamar Began

For a year after the Frierdiker Rebbe's passing, Chassidim pressed Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson to accept the leadership of Chabad openly. The anniversary of 10 Shevat 5711 became the day on which refusal gave way to public acceptance.

At 6:55 on the preceding evening, Rabbi Menachem Mendel led the prayers in the Frierdiker Rebbe's private room. The hallway was filled. During Kaddish he struggled to contain his tears. At his request, a minyan of bochurim and married men learned the Frierdiker Rebbe's *Basi LeGani* discourse in that room continuously through the twenty-four hours of the yahrtzeit.

The next morning he again led the prayers there. He glanced toward the Frierdiker Rebbe's chair, prayed quietly, and wept. He wore the silk kapote used on Shabbos and Yom Tov. After Shacharis, people submitted panim.

Before the journey to the Ohel, Rabbi Meir Ashkenazi presented a worldwide *ksav hiskashrus*. It urged Rabbi Menachem Mendel to accept the nesius and argued that public leadership and the saying of Chassidus would hasten the redemption.

"Yes," he answered, "but people need to help me as well."

Ten buses arrived at noon, and by one o'clock the group had left for the cemetery. At the Ohel, the communal pan was read and given to Rabbi Menachem Mendel. He placed it in his pocket. When he removed it again, he trembled, bit his lips, exclaimed "Ach," and wept. Because the hour was

late, he read the names of the signatories rather than the entire text.

He returned shortly before sunset and led Minchah. After Maariv the gabbai announced a farbrengen for eight that evening.

Approximately eight hundred people crowded into the rooms of 770 and the outside courtyard. The bima had been moved between the aron kodesh and the second entrance to the hallway. The smaller room and corridors were packed; loudspeakers carried the sound outside. The crush was severe. Some people fainted despite the freezing weather.

The tables formed the shape of a shin. For the first time, Rabbi Menachem Mendel's place along the southern wall near the door to the adjoining room was raised on a platform.

After his daily visit to his mother, Rebbetzin Chana, he entered the farbrengen at 9:45. Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Kazarnovsky and Rabbi Ephraim Eliezer Yolles of Philadelphia followed. Reb Yosef Robinson poured his l'chaim.

The secretary Rabbi Moshe Leib Rodstein arranged to record the gathering. That recording preserves the voice of the first maamar. It does not prove that every aside was captured: Rabbi Yoel Kahn later warned that Rabbi Menachem Mendel said brief things between the formal talks while people sang and said l'chaim, and he did not know whether all of them entered the written transcript.

In the first sicha, Rabbi Menachem Mendel spoke about continued attachment to the Frierdiker Rebbe and the obligation to fulfill his shlichus. The Frierdiker Rebbe's Psalm 71, he ruled, should continue to be said until 12 Tammuz 5711, when he would have entered another year. Rabbi Menachem Mendel wept several times.

When someone offered unsolicited advice, he answered with a story from the Frierdiker Rebbe's youth. The fifteen-year-old Frierdiker Rebbe was sent on a mission by his