

At the Summit of *Sinai*

וַאֲבֵא אֶתְכֶם אֵלַי

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Chassidic Tales & Teachings
For Iyar and Sivan

Chaim Davies

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שנת וממדב"ר מתנ"ה לפ"ק

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❧ SIVAN ❧

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Iyar

זמַן אֵיָר

Yahrzeits in Iyar

Legacies of Tzaddikim

1. “Hashem Is Standing Over Me”

R. Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk — Rosh Chodesh Iyar

As the life of R. Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk drew to its close in Tiveria, several people stood beside him. The Rebbe asked them to leave the room.

“כִּי הִנֵּה ה' נִצָּב עָלַי” – *For behold, Hashem is standing over me*, he said.

They left him alone. Approximately an hour later, R. Menachem Mendel passed away.

Source: ‘Hilulat HaShafel BeEmes HaYom BeTiveria,’ HaKol HaYehudi.

2. One Night of Sleep

R. Shmuel Shmelke Horowitz of Nikolsburg — Yahrzeit: 1 Iyar

R. Shmuel Shmelke of Nikolsburg drove himself relentlessly in Torah and avodah. Sleep was among the bodily needs he tried to minimize, and eventually his refusal to rest properly weakened him so severely that the people of his household became frightened for his health. The doctors told him that he had to lie down and sleep each night. R. Shmelke paid little attention. His family therefore turned to someone whom they hoped he might listen to: his friend and fellow disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch, R. Elimelech of Lizhensk. They described R. Shmelke’s condition and begged R. Elimelech to intervene.

Eventually R. Elimelech came to visit him. R. Shmelke received him joyfully and prepared a seudah in his honor. During the meal, R. Elimelech poured his host a cup of especially old wine. R. Shmelke drank. The wine did what argument had not accomplished. He fell into a deep sleep and slept through the night.

The following morning the group assembled for Shacharis. The tradition relates that R. Shmelke davened with exceptional intensity. When the congregation reached Shiras HaYam, his consciousness of Krias Yam Suf became so immediate that he lifted the bottom of his garment as though he himself were walking through the water.

That evening R. Elimelech prepared a meal at his lodgings and again invited him to eat and again wished to pour him wine. This time R. Shmelke refused. “That works only once,” he said. R. Elimelech challenged him. What had he lost by sleeping? On the contrary—the following morning’s tefillah had been extraordinary.

R. Shmelke explained that this was precisely because the sleep had followed a long period in which he had scarcely laid down his head. One such night could restore his strength and produce extraordinary clarity. But if he began lying down and sleeping normally every night, he said, he would no longer be capable of the yichudim that formed part of his avodah in tefillah. The story was subsequently used to illuminate Yaakov Avinu’s exceptional sleep at Beis El: “*vayishkav bamakom hahu*”—he lay down on that night, after fourteen years of Torah study without lying down. In the source’s explanation, the preparation preceding that one night made possible the exalted dream that followed.

Source: Siach Yaakov Yosef, Vayetze, s.v. Vayachalom.

3. “Your House Did Not Burn”

R. Avraham Weinberg, the Beis Avraham of Slonim — Jahrzeit: 1 Iyar

During the First World War, R. Zainvil Edelstein lived in the Polish town of Czyżów. The Beis Avraham of Slonim had previously stayed as a guest in his home. In 1915 the town was captured amid the fighting. R. Zainvil fled

eastward together with the retreating Russian forces. While on the road, word reached him that Czyżów had gone up in flames. The news devastated him. He had been a man of means; now, as far as he knew, everything he owned had vanished overnight.

Eventually he reached Slonim. He entered the Beis Avraham and poured out what had happened. Yesterday, in effect, he had been a wealthy man; today he possessed nothing. His town had burned and his home with it. The Rebbe listened. Then the Beis Avraham lowered his head onto his hand and remained like that for several moments. At last he raised his head. “Do not cry,” he told R. Zainvil. “Do not cry. Your house did not burn.” There was no explanation.

Much later, when R. Zainvil was finally able to return to Czyżów, he saw the devastation for himself. The town had indeed burned. The fire had swept through the streets until it reached his property. And there it had stopped. His house was standing untouched.

Source: R. Noach Gad Weintraub, Bishishim Chochmah, p. 45, §2, quoting his brother R. Aharon’s letter.

4. The Night the Rebbe’s House Burned

R. Nachman of Breslov — Shabbos Rosh Chodesh Iyar, 5570/1810

There had already been several fires in Breslov during Pesach that year.

On Isru Chag, which fell on Friday, Reb Noson and his friend Reb Naftali came to spend Shabbos with R. Nachman. They had also visited during Chol HaMoed and heard Torah from him. After Shabbos, Reb Noson returned home, but on Tuesday circumstances brought him back to Breslov. He remained for the following Shabbos, Rosh Chodesh Iyar.

At the Friday-night table, R. Nachman began speaking of not knowing anything—a way of expressing himself that Reb Noson had heard from him before.

Then the noise of a fire broke into the gathering. A blaze had started in the street near the Rebbe's home.

"Shoin, shoin," R. Nachman said—"Already, already."

He had spoken about the possibility of a fire beforehand. To Reb Noson, his response sounded like that of someone already prepared for what was coming.

The table broke up. R. Nachman hurried outside, and everyone followed. His house burned that night.

But the people around him succeeded in removing everything it contained. Reb Noson remembered the completeness of the rescue in the words "from a thread to a shoelace": the house was lost, but nothing inside it was left to the flames.

R. Nachman spent the night on a hill outside the town, opposite the area of his house and the shul. From there he watched the fire. Reb Noson was beside him for part of the night and saw that the Rebbe remained joyful.

Toward dawn, Reb Noson came to him again. The fire had stopped. The house had already burned.

R. Nachman said that they should return to town. There was no longer a home to which he could return, so he went by the river, taking the route that led to the bridge. Reb Noson followed him.

"Who would have said," the Rebbe remarked as they walked, "that on Friday night, close to daybreak, we would be walking along this road?"

They entered the town and went to Reb Shimon's house, at the end of Breslov on the road toward Uman. R. Nachman stayed there throughout Shabbos and into Sunday.

His rescued belongings had been taken elsewhere—to Reb Zelig's home, at another end of the town, a considerable distance from Reb Shimon's house. On Sunday, the Rebbe moved there, joining the possessions his chassidim had carried out of the fire.

5. A Name from the Water Carrier

*The Tzemach Tzedek and the birth of R. Shmuel of Lubavitch, the Maharash —
2–9 Iyar, 5594/1834*

After the fire of 5592, it was decided to build a new home and beis midrash for the Tzemach Tzedek. His existing house had escaped the flames, but the court needed new premises. The local nobleman, Lubomirsky, instructed his estate manager to supply the timber and boards. The peasants would transport them, and the builders would work without charge.

The Rebbe intended to inaugurate the house on Shavuot. His wife, Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka, had another wish: she wanted her child to be born there. When her labor began, she went to the new house.

No one had yet taken up residence. Pesach equipment was stored in the rooms, including a new wooden bed that had served as a frame for sifting flour for shemurah matzah. Two poles had rested across its sides; the sieve was moved along them, and the flour fell onto a sheet below. After Pesach, such a bed could be put to ordinary household use.

Straw was brought and laid upon it, and the Rebbetzin lay down.

When the Tzemach Tzedek was told, he hurried there and remained in the room, facing the wall, throughout the birth. He instructed three of his sons—R. Baruch Shalom, R. Yehuda Leib, and R. Chaim Shneur Zalman—to say Tehillim in another room. He specified chapters 1–4, chapter 20 three times, then 22–24, 33, 47, 72, 86, 90–93, 104, 112, and 113 through the end. He told the midwife to immerse before receiving the child and gave her a piece of white cloth in which to receive him.

On 2 Iyar, Tiferes shebeTiferes, the child was born.

On the eighth day, the Tzemach Tzedek instructed everyone to daven Shacharis early. By ten in the morning, the family had assembled. At their head was R. Chaim Avraham, the Alter Rebbe's son.

But the Tzemach Tzedek remained in his room.

By almost two in the afternoon, the waiting guests were becoming uneasy. R. Chaim Avraham remarked that the Rebbe was occupied with guests finer than themselves, and sighed.

About half an hour later, the Tzemach Tzedek emerged. His face was bright, his eyes bore the signs of weeping, and he held a red handkerchief.

“The bris will be today,” he said.

After a short interval, he returned to his room.

R. Chaim Avraham went to the window, rested his head upon his hands, and became absorbed in thought. The Rebbe’s sons discussed Torah, while the guests grew increasingly anxious. The Rebbetzin sent to ask why the bris was being delayed, but R. Chaim Avraham prevented the messenger from entering the Rebbe’s room.

After three, the Tzemach Tzedek came out again. He told them to take heart: the bris would be that day. Again he withdrew.

At four, he emerged a third time. They should not daven Minchah yet, he said; the bris would take place shortly.

A little later he went to the Rebbetzin to discuss the child’s name. He instructed them to prepare the baby and entered the room where the minyan was assembled.

R. Dovber, son of R. Yosef, later related that he had been present when his father performed the circumcision. The baby cried intensely. The Tzemach Tzedek drew his left hand from beneath the cushion supporting the child and placed it on the infant’s head. The child began to smile and stopped crying.

When the brachos were finished, the Rebbe began Ashrei and told them to proceed promptly with Minchah. His brother-in-law, R. Nachum, son of the Mittlerer Rebbe, led the tefillah. They then sat down to the seudas mitzvah.

The baby had been named Shmuel.

R. Yehuda Leib asked his father after whom the child was named. It was not a name found in their family. Quietly, he suggested: perhaps Shmuel HaNavi?

The Tzemach Tzedek answered that he was named after a water carrier in Polotsk whose name was Shmuel.

“A chacham is greater than a navi,” he added.

He then spoke enigmatically about the verse, “The days of our years are seventy years,” mentioning different levels of days—eighty, seventy—and the word *bahem* together with its letters.

Years afterward, at the end of Sivan 5642, the Maharash recalled those words. *Bahem*, including the number of its letters, amounted to fifty, he said, and sighed deeply. The family record later counted the calendar years touched by his life—from 5594 through 5643—as fifty.

Source: *Sefer HaToldos—Admor Maharash*, compiled from the Rayatz’s records and talks; first published 5707/1947, pp. 5–7.

6. “Feed the Jews Who Come to My Levayah”

R. Yeshaya Steiner of Kerestir — 3 Iyar

Even during his final illness, Reb Shayeles of Kerestir was concerned with feeding the Jews who would come to him. Soon, he told those around him, there would be a large levayah in Kerestir. Many people would arrive, and food and drink would have to be ready for them.

He instructed those around him to prepare large pots of potatoes with fat. He arranged what the visitors should be given to eat and drink, and said that his son, R. Avraham, should continue the work of hachnasas orchim after him.

He entrusted the preparation of the meal to a woman who needed his help. She had been childless for many years and had come to ask for a yeshuah. Reb Shayeles told her that if she undertook to prepare food for the people who came to his levayah, she would merit the help for which she was waiting.

The woman was troubled by the request. Who would want to eat at such a time?

Reb ShayeLe told her to explain that their eating would help her receive a yeshuah. For her sake, they would agree to take the food she offered.

After his passing, a great crowd gathered in Kerestir. When the levayah was over, the mourners sat down to the meal he had arranged. The woman served them. In time, she was blessed with a child.

Source: R. Menashe Yisrael Reisman, shiur of 3 Iyar 5775, p. 3; Mordechai Weinstock, 'Kol HaDerachim Movilos LeKerestir,' BeKehillah, reproduced by Dirshu.

Two received accounts preserve different parts of the preparations. The woman's objection and the reported birth belong to the Weinstock telling. Neither account is presented as identified eyewitness testimony.

7. The Rebbe with the Broom

R. Avraham Yaakov Friedman of Sadigura, the Avir Yaakov — Yom HaAtzmaut

On Yom HaAtzmaut, R. Avraham Yaakov of Sadigura would come to the Great Synagogue in Tel Aviv to say Hallel with the congregation. When the worshippers went outside and formed a circle to dance, he joined them with conspicuous enthusiasm.

People sensed that the day held a particular joy for him.

One of his chassidim drew him into conversation, and the Rebbe explained.

When he had been living in Vienna, the Nazis had entered the city and begun humiliating its Jews. As a leader of the Jewish community, he had been singled out. They put a large broom into his hands and made him sweep the streets.

While he worked, he prayed that he might yet merit to sweep the streets of Eretz Yisrael.

Then they put a Nazi flag into his hands and forced him to mount it on a high building.

Again he prayed: may he yet merit to raise the flag of Israel in a high place in Eretz Yisrael.

He survived and reached the Land. Now he wished to carry out the things he had spoken of in those prayers.

But he could not simply stand in the street with a broom before everyone's eyes.

On Yom HaAtzmaut, he therefore rose at three in the morning. Taking a large broom, he went out and swept the streets near his home.

He also took the Israeli flag and placed it on the roof, rejoicing that Hashem had heard his tefillah.

When the congregation later saw him dancing, they were seeing the joy of a man who remembered another broom and another flag—and had lived to carry out, in Eretz Yisrael, the prayers he had whispered while being humiliated in Vienna.

Source: R. Yissachar Tamar, Alei Tamar, commentary to Yerushalmi, Shevi'is 4:7; R. Uriel Shalmoni, "Sippurei Ha'Alei Tamar," Be'erot, no. 2, "*Hanhagaso shel ha-Admor mi-Sadigura be-Yom HaAtzmaut*".

Sefiras HaOmer

Counting Towards Sinai

8. Even the Non-Jew Counted the Omer

The Yehudi HaKadosh of Peshischa told his disciples that, during the days of Sefirah, all creatures were compelled to express the number of that day's count in their own language.

The chassidim wondered at the statement and wanted to see what it meant in practice.

They remained with a non-Jew for a full day, from one time of day to the same time the next. They listened carefully to everything he said.

Eventually he began telling them about an animal he had sold. In describing the transaction, he named the number of gold coins he had received.

It was precisely the number of that day's Sefiras HaOmer.

Source: Tzvi LaTzadik, "Beis Tzadik," the letter of R. Dovid Tevel HaKohen Rosenblum of Radom to R. Tzvi Yechezkel Michelson of Plonsk.

9. I Already Told You Fifteen Times

Reb Amram Taub of Berehove recalled something the chassidim had noticed in the Satmar Rav's ordinary conversation during the days of Sefirah.

If the Rav was displeased that an instruction had not been followed, he might say on the fifteenth day, "I have already told you fifteen times to do it."

On the twenty-third day, the number in the same kind of remark could be twenty-three.

The observers marveled at the way the day's count entered even his everyday speech.

Source: *Siach Zekeinim* V, p. 88, from R. Amram Taub of Berehove.

10. The Roar That Made the Yeitiv Lev Tremble

Many people, including other tzaddikim, traveled to Rimanov for the *yahrzeit* of Reb Menachem Mendel. The Yeitiv Lev recalled being there and davening Minchah with Reb Tzvi Hirsch of Rimanov.

The Yeitiv Lev was not yet ready to daven Maariv, so he left the *beis midrash*. Reb Eliezer of Dzhikov went out as well. Reb Tzvi Hirsch remained inside and began the evening prayer.

His voice was like the roar of a lion. When he reached *Sefiras HaOmer*, the sound made the Yeitiv Lev recoil.

Reb Eliezer turned to him.

“Mechutan, why were you so startled?” he asked. “Do you not know that Reb Hersch has endured ten trials like Avraham Avinu?”

Source: *Siach Zekeinim* V, p. 94: the compiler heard from the rav of Paya, who heard from R. Yoel of Satmar.

11. The Day's Sefirah in the Mikveh

The Tzemach Tzedek preserved a teaching that the Alter Rebbe had received from Reb Avraham HaMalach: during *Sefiras HaOmer*, a person should direct his intention in the mikveh toward the Sefirah of that particular day.

Once Reb Avraham was ill and could not go to immerse. He sent the Alter Rebbe to the mikveh on his behalf, instructing him to immerse with the intention belonging to that day's Sefirah.

In the explanation transmitted with the teaching, the daily immersion is linked to the fiftieth gate of Shavuot and

the light of Mashiach. The preparation of one day belongs to the purification toward which all the days are moving.

Source: Tzemach Tzedek, Biurei HaZohar II, p. 945, in the name of the Alter Rebbe and R. Avraham HaMalach.

12. The Chassid's Unspoken Question

R. Yosef Meir Weiss, the Imrei Yosef of Spinka — Yahrzeit: 6 Iyyar

The Imrei Yosef of Spinka was once visiting a large city to serve as sandek at a bris. Word of his presence spread, and hundreds of people assembled around him. After the meal the Rebbe bentched. He was accustomed to reciting Bircas HaMazon from a siddur of the Arizal. When he came to the words: “וְנָא אֶל תַּצְרִיכֵנוּ... לֹא לִידֵי מַתָּנָה בְּשָׁר וָדָם וְלֹא לִידֵי הֶלֶךְ אֶתְּם” “Please do not cause us to need... the gifts of flesh and blood, nor their loans,” he became deeply aroused.

One of the chassidim was standing immediately behind the Rebbe's chair. A thought entered his mind. How, he wondered, could the Rebbe pray with such fervor that he should never need gifts or loans from other people? In a few minutes the assembled crowd would begin approaching with kvitlach and pidyonos. Receiving money from Jews who came for brachos and yeshuos was itself part of the Rebbe's livelihood. The chassid immediately rebuked himself for entertaining the question and pushed it away.

The Rebbe finished bentching. Then he turned around. He handed that very chassid some of the kos shel brachah and began speaking. There really was, he said, an apparent difficulty in those words of Bircas HaMazon. Chazal established this tefillah for every Jew—even for someone whose livelihood comes from what others give him so that he should daven on their behalf.

But there was a distinction. Suppose a Jew gives a tzaddik money and asks him to daven for a yeshuah. If the tefillah is answered and the requested yeshuah is accomplished, then the money was not really a gift. Something was given in return. The Rebbe compared this to an exchange, adding the teaching that the poor person does more for the giver than the giver does for the poor.

person. But if the tzaddik accepts the money and the tefillah accomplishes nothing, then the money remains a gift. And if the yeshuah eventually comes, but only after a delay? Until it arrives, the money resembles a loan.

That, the Imrei Yosef explained, is what he was asking for. “Do not cause us to need the gifts of flesh and blood”—may the tefillos said for those who support us be accepted. “And not their loans”—may those tefillos be answered immediately, so that even temporarily the money does not remain unpaid. The chassid who had asked the question only in his own mind received his answer directly from the Rebbe.

Source: Introduction to Likkutei Imrei Yosef—Moadim.

13. The House the Rebbe Would Not Let Them Buy

R. Moshe Hager of Shotz — Yahrzeit: 9 Iyyar

In the town of Shotz lived a large family named Wittberg. For many years the father of the family had been desperately poor. During the First World War, however, he entered several business ventures and unexpectedly became wealthy. He did not keep his new prosperity to himself. The later testimony remembers him as a generous man who assisted the needy of Shotz liberally. With money now available, he decided that the time had come to purchase a large, comfortable house for his growing family.

His father-in-law was a chassid of R. Moshe Hager of Shotz. Before such a major purchase, the older man insisted, nothing should be done without first asking the Rebbe. The prospective buyer went to R. Moshe and explained the plan. The Rebbe told him not to buy the house. No dramatic prophecy accompanied the instruction. No explanation was offered. The man was deeply puzzled. He finally had the money; his family needed the space; and the purchase seemed entirely sensible. But he trusted the Rebbe. He let the opportunity go.

Some time afterward his fortune disappeared. Without money and without substantial property tying him to

Shotz, he eventually decided that perhaps his future lay elsewhere. He left Romania and went to Eretz Yisrael. His children followed in stages. The oldest son, R. Yaakov Wittberg, was serving in the Romanian army and could not immediately join them. Eventually he too succeeded in leaving—on what he remembered as the final aliyah that departed before the Holocaust engulfed the region.

Only years later did the family look backward and understand what the Rebbe's seemingly inexplicable refusal had meant to them. Had their father purchased the large house at the height of his prosperity, they reasoned, the family would have established itself permanently in Shotz. Even after losing cash, a substantial home would have given them something to hold onto. Instead, the absence of that property helped propel them toward Eretz Yisrael before the gates closed. There the family eventually established a chocolate factory and, after the war, used its resources to help other survivors from Shotz.

Source: *Tovos Zichronos*, R. Yehuda Leib Kostiner's recollections, 2016; *Be'er BaSadeh*.

14. The Letter That Waited Two Years in the Next World

R. Dovid Twersky of Tolna — Yahrzeit: 10 Iyyar

On Friday night of Parashas Korach, 5640, R. Chaim Liberson came to wish R. Dovid of Tolna a good Shabbos. The Rebbe rose from the sofa and spoke of their family connections. Liberson belonged to the Berdichever family of R. Liber the Great, descended from R. Shimshon of Ostropoli. R. Dovid's mechutan, R. Moshe Yosef Chodorov, son of the baal tzedakah R. Yehoshua Elazar, belonged to that family as well.

R. Dovid had arranged a shidduch with the family. People began talking. The family was believed to be wealthy, and some insinuated that for all the Rebbe's lofty ways, perhaps money had played its part in the match. R. Dovid heard what people were saying. They were mistaken, he told them. His prospective mechutan had already lost his