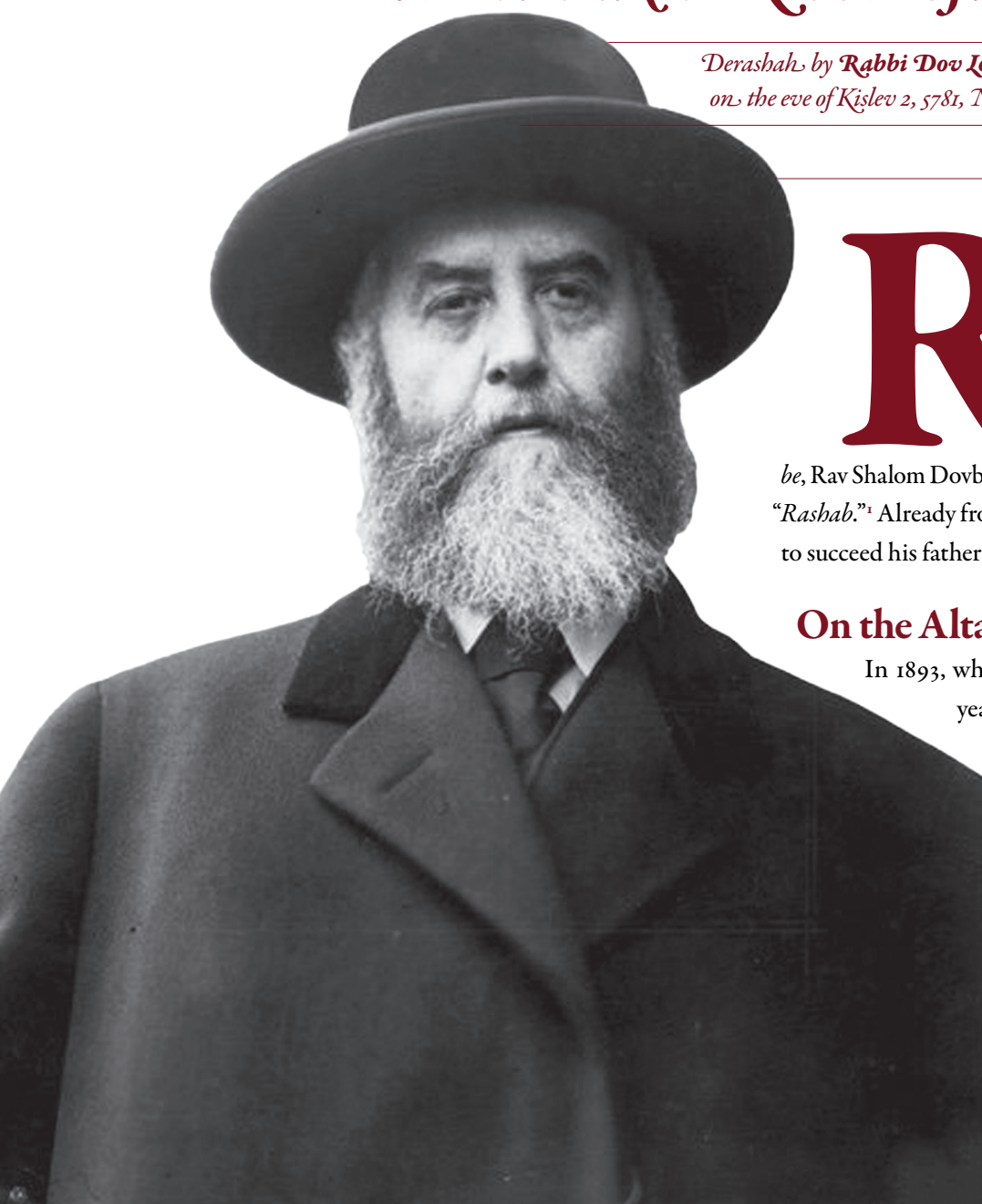




עתה אלקי יהיו גא עיניך פתחות ואזניך קשבות לתפלת המקום הזה

*A Life of Heroism*  
*Mesirus Nefesh, and Miracles:*  
*The “Rebbe Rayatz”*  
*Rav Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn*  
*“The Frierdiker Rebbe” of Lubavitch*

*Derashah, by Rabbi Dov Loketch, via Zoom*  
*on the eve of Kislev 2, 5781, November 17, 2020*



**R**AV YOSEF YITZCHAK Schneerson, the sixth *Rebbe* of Lubavitch, was born on Tamuz 12, 5640 (1880) in the town of Lubavitch. He was the only son of the fifth *Rebbe*, Rav Shalom Dovber Schneersohn, who was known as the “*Rashab*.”<sup>1</sup> Already from birth, Yosef Yitzchak was groomed to succeed his father as leader of the Lubavitch movement.

**On the Altar of *Mesirus Nefesh***

In 1893, when Yosef Yitzchak was just thirteen years old, his father brought him to the cemetery, and they stood at the graves of the previous *Rebbs* of Lubavitch. The *Rashab* turned to his son and said, “Your namesake, Yitzchak *Avinu*, was bound on the *Mizbei’ach*, being מוסר נפש, preparing to surrender his life for

<sup>1</sup> 1860-1920.

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“  
... At a very young age,  
Rav Yosef Yitzchak displayed the *Mesirus Nefesh*  
his father had assigned to him at his *Bar Mitzvah* ...”  
”

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*HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. Yosef Yitzchak, I am now binding you on the *Mizbei'ach*, on the altar of *Mesirus Nefesh*, of unlimited and unbridled devotion to your people. From this day on, you must dedicate your life to *Klal Yisrael*.”

Two years later, when Yosef Yitzchak was just fifteen, his father appointed him to serve as his personal assistant and secretary. Despite his young age, he began filling the role of his father's emissary to rabbinical conferences throughout Lithuania and beyond, in places such as Kovno, Vilna and St. Petersburg. Rav Yosef Yitzchak quickly emerged as an effective spokesman and ambassador for the Lubavitch movement, and for *Klal Yisrael* generally.

In 1897, at the age of seventeen, he married his second cousin, Nechamah Dinah Schneersohn, a great-granddaughter of the third *Rebbe* of Lubavitch, the *Tzemach Tzedek*.<sup>2</sup> The couple would have three daughters.

The *Rashab* launched what was then a new innovation in the Lubavitch movement, founding a Yeshiva in the town of Lubavitch, which he named ‘*Tomchei Temimim*’. Students came from all over Russia, and they lived and ate together in the Yeshiva, in contrast to the traditional practice of lodging and eating with local Jewish families. The *Rashab* appointed Rav Yosef Yitzchak as the *Menabel HaPoel* (chief administrator) of the new institution. The Yeshiva combined classic, advanced-level *Gemara* learning with the study of *Chassidus*, particularly the *Sefer HaTanya*, the foundational work of Lubavitch *Chassidus* authored by the movement's founder, Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi (the “*Ba'al HaTanya*”).<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the Yeshiva would often bring in a leading *Talmid Chacham* from a typical

*Litvishe*, Yeshiva background to deliver the highest *Shiur*. For example, Rav Yechezkel Abramsky<sup>4</sup>, a product of several prominent Lithuanian Yeshivos and a leading disciple of Rav Chaim of Brisk<sup>5</sup>, spent time as a *Magid Shiur* in one of the branches of *Tomchei Temimim*.

The Yeshiva was very successful, producing numerous *Rabbanim* as well as lay leaders, and branches of *Tomchei Temimim* were established in various cities throughout Russia.

The *Rashab* directed his attention not only to his flock's spiritual needs, but also to their material needs. He undertook a particularly innovative project to help alleviate the Jewish community's financial hardships, working with a number of leading industrialists to build a major textile factory in the town of Dubrovna. The facility opened in 1902, and employed 2,000 Jews.

In 1905, the First Russian Revolution erupted, bringing a wave of unrest aimed at ending the rule of the Czar. Although the Czarist regime succeeded in quashing the revolution, significant inroads were made in weakening support for the Czar, resulting in the establishment of the *Duma*, a congress that represented the people. The Czar still had the final word, but nevertheless, the *Duma* marked an important development, giving the people a voice in the government for the first time. This period of instability saw an uptick in pogroms and attacks against Jews. Rav Yosef Yitzchak, only in his twenties, was sent as his father's emissary to St. Petersburg, where he met with high-ranking government officials and appealed for increased police protection and for greater efforts to restrain the antisemitic rioters. And thus already at a very young age, Rav Yosef Yitzchak displayed the kind

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<sup>2</sup> Rav Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, 1789-1866.

<sup>3</sup> 1745-1812.

<sup>4</sup> 1886-1976.

<sup>5</sup> 1853-1918.

**The October 1926 rabbinic conference in Korosten, Ukraine** to lobby governmental authorities to recognize Jewish religious institutions was a major cause of the *Rebbe's* imprisonment.



of *Mesirus Nefesh* that his father had assigned to him at his *Bar Mitzvah*, devoting himself tirelessly for the wellbeing of *Klal Yisrael*.

During the ensuing years, Rav Yosef Yitzchak continued serving this role of looking after the Jews of Russia. His wide-ranging activities led to his being arrested on four different occasions. None of these arrests led to a conviction, or even a trial, but this shows just how he had emerged as a leading activist for Jewish causes in the country.

## Heroic Resistance to the *Yevseksiya*

In 1920, the *Rashab* died, and Rav Yosef Yitzchak, at the age of forty, became the sixth *Rebbe* of Lubavitch.

He assumed this role during the period that followed World War I, when the Bolsheviks completed their successful revolution against the Czar and began implementing their vision for Russia, which included a fierce campaign to obliterate religious observance of any kind. The Jews of Russia suffered from extreme poverty, wrought by the constant wars that ravaged the country, and also faced the hostility of the Communist regime, particularly of the *Yevseksiya*, the viciously antireligious Jewish faction of the Communist party. The *Yevseksiya* invested special efforts to shut down even Jewish institutions which were not officially illegal. The government had banned formal Jewish education, but informal and private learning was allowed. The *Yevseksiya*, however, consistently agitated and cast false allegations in an attempt to destroy all vestiges of Torah Judaism in Russia.

The *Rebbe* worked courageously to maintain Jewish life. Together with a number of other heroic figures, such

as Rav Yechezkel Abramsky and Rav Shlomo Yosef Zevin<sup>6</sup>, he did what he could to perform weddings, arrange *Gitten*, build *Mikvaos*, and ensure the availability of *Tefilin*, and he ran an underground *Chinuch* network. These efforts were fraught with danger, and many Jews, and *Rabbanim*, left Russia. But the *Rayatz* and several others remained with their flocks in order to sustain religious life to whatever extent possible.

Seeing that the future of Russian Jewry looked uncertain, the *Rebbe* began expanding the Lubavitch movement beyond Russia. He established *Yeshiva Tomchei Temimim* in Warsaw, Poland, and this became a major Yeshiva in the city. Additionally, he organized an *Anshei Agudas Chabad* in the United States. Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson<sup>7</sup>, one of the *Rebbe's Chasidim*, was his emissary to the United States and played a key role in the movement's activities on these shores.

In 1923, the *Rebbe* assembled nine prominent Lubavitch *Chasidim* in St. Petersburg so they would make a formal oath in the presence of a *Minyan*, vowing to each other that they would all remain until they could no longer continue their underground work. He sent teachers and rabbis even to the remotest areas in Russia, and he worked arduously to obtain funds for Russia's Jews, working with the Joint Distribution Committee, and also smuggling. Additionally, he set up a special committee to help Jews observe *Shabbos*.

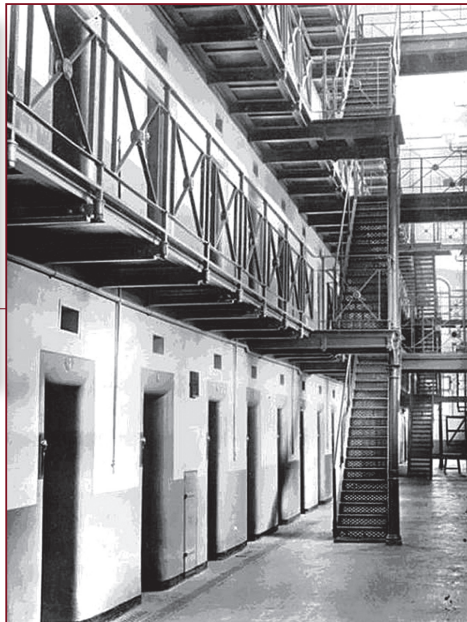
In October, 1926, a group of Russian rabbis assembled in Korosten, Ukraine, for the purpose of lobbying for the legalization of Jewish institutions. Although the *Rebbe* did not

<sup>6</sup> 1888-1978.

<sup>7</sup> 1895-1975.



**Stanislav Messing,** chairman of the Leningrad secret police, had been a *Chasid* but then gave up religion and embraced Communism



**Spalerno prison in Leningrad**

attend the conference, he was nevertheless named honorary president in absentia, in light of his status as the leading figure among Russian Jewry at the time. This conference was regarded by the *Yevseksiya* as an audacious expression of public defiance, further exacerbating their fury against the *Rebbe*.

The *Yevseksiya* waged an all-out war against the *Rebbe*. This group felt great contempt for the *Rebbe*, and they hounded him relentlessly in an effort to intimidate him. The head of the *Yevseksiya*, interestingly enough, was Semyon Dimanstein, who had learned in Telz and Slabodka, and had been a Lubavitcher *Chasid*, before abandoning his faith and joining the Communists. On one occasion, three agents stormed into the *Rebbe's Shul*—when he was observing *Yahrtzeit* for his father—to arrest him. The *Rebbe* explained to them, very calmly, that under no circumstances would he discontinue his activities promoting Jewish observance. One of the agents pointed a gun at him and said, “This little toy has made many a man change his mind,” whereupon the *Rebbe* answered, “Your little toy can intimidate only a man who has many gods (passions) and but one world (this world). Because I have only one G-d and two worlds, I am not impressed by your little toy.”<sup>8</sup>

## Imprisonment and International Outcry

On Tuesday night, June 14, 1927, the *Rebbe* was arrested by the Soviet Secret Police and confined in the notorious

Spalerno prison in Leningrad.<sup>9</sup> The chairman of the Leningrad secret police was Stanislav Messing, who, like Semyon Dimanstein of the *Yevseksiya*, had been a

*Chasid* but then gave up religion and embraced Communism. Messing was virulently antireligious, and, unlike the *Yevseksiya*, he had the authority to arrest the *Rebbe*.

The next morning, the *Rebbe* demanded that he be given a chance to put on *Tefilin*. Seeing that his request would be denied, he began putting them on, in the presence of the guards, who knocked the *Rebbe* down the steel staircase and confiscated the *Tefilin*. He was tortured and placed in solitary confinement, but he remained defiant, insisting that he had done nothing wrong and avowing to continue his religious activities.

The Soviet authorities sentenced the *Rebbe* to death, sparking a public outcry across the world. Just days after the *Rebbe's* arrest, his son-in-law, Rav Shemaryahu Gurary (the “*Rashag*”)<sup>10</sup>, traveled to Moscow to try to intercede on the *Rebbe's* behalf. Prominent Jewish leaders who lobbied for his release included Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook<sup>11</sup>, Chief Rabbi of Palestine, who sent an urgent telegram to the American Joint Distribution Committee, urging them to intervene. Rav Meir Hildesheimer<sup>12</sup> of Berlin, son of Rav Azriel Hildesheimer<sup>13</sup>, together with a leader of the Reform movement, Dr. Leo Baeck, appealed to Dr. Oskar Cohn, a prominent Jewish member of Germany's Socialist Party,

<sup>8</sup> The *Yevseksiya* operated for around ten years. In the 1930s, during Stalin's “Great Purge,” he decided these Jewish agitators were no longer needed, and they were all executed.

<sup>9</sup> St. Petersburg was renamed “Leningrad” in January 1924, after Lenin's death. In 1991, the name, by popular vote, was changed back to St. Petersburg.

<sup>10</sup> 1898-1989.

<sup>11</sup> 1865-1935.

<sup>12</sup> 1864-1934.

<sup>13</sup> 1820-1899.

**Telegram sent  
by Rav Kook**

JUNE 29TH, 1927.

FOR JOINT DISTRIBUTION COMMITTEE  
THROUGH THE CENTRAL RELIEF COMMITTEE

GRAVE NEWS RECEIVED RABBI SCHNEIERSON OF LUBOVITCH ARRESTED  
LENINGRAD BOLSHEVIKS STOP TRY URGENT FOR DELIVERATION WIRE  
RESULTS

CHIEF RABBI COOK  
JERUSALEM

who met with Russia's ambassador to Berlin. In the United States, Louis Brandies, the first Jewish Supreme Court Justice, and even President Calvin Coolidge, made appeals to the Soviet authorities calling for the *Rebbe's* release.

Back in Russia, the *Chassidim* turned to Yekaterina Peshkova, a human rights activist and wife of the famous Russian writer Maxim Gorky. She was sympathetic to the cause, and had access to the highest echelons of the Russian government, as her husband was a close friend of Stalin. Peshkova enlisted the help of Vyacheslav Menzhinsky, chairman of the Soviet Secret Police, to secure the *Rebbe's* release.

The public pressure proved too much for the Soviet government to ignore. The execution of the leading Jewish religious leader in Russia, who commanded such respect and esteem across the globe, would have tarnished Russia's reputation more than it could allow.

The authorities commuted the *Rebbe's* sentence, and condemned him to ten years of labor in the Solovetsky Island prison camp. This sentence was then commuted to three years in Kostroma, a city some two hundred miles from Moscow. Stanislav Messing, the vehemently antireligious head of the Leningrad police, was angry that the *Rebbe* was given such a "light" sentence.

In his effort to cause the *Rebbe* further torment, Messing determined that the *Rebbe* must travel to Kostroma on *Shabbos*. The *Rebbe* adamantly refused, sensing that his public desecration of *Shabbos* would be seen as a victory for the *Yevseksiya* and other antireligious groups. The *Chassidim* again appealed to Yekaterina Peshkova, who intervened on the *Rebbe's* behalf and succeeded in having the exile begin on Sunday, instead of *Shabbos*.

On *Tamuz* 3 (July 3), 1927, a large group of *Chassidim*

assembled on the platform of the Leningrad Train Station to bid the *Rebbe* farewell. From the train, the *Rebbe* addressed the crowd, delivering what would become a famous speech, and what has been described as the "Gettysburg Address" for Lubavitch *Chassidim*:

*"May Gd be with us as He was with our ancestors; may He not forsake us nor abandon us . . . "14 Only our bodies went into exile, but not our souls . . . We must proclaim openly before all that with regard to any matter of our religion—Torah, Mitzvos and Jewish custom—it is not subject to the opinion of others, nor can any oppressive force be used against it. We must state with the greatest and strongest Jewish stubbornness, with the thousands of years of Jewish Mesirus Nefesh and sacrifice: "Touch not My anointed ones! Do no evil to My prophets!"15*

*... This is our request to the Almighty: "May He not forsake us nor abandon us." Gd should give us true strength to be unintimidated by physical pain, and on the contrary, to accept it with joy, so that every punishment we receive for supporting a Cheder, for learning Torah, for performance of Mitzvos, shall increase our fortitude in the holy work of strengthening Judaism.*

*We must remember that imprisonment and hard labor are only temporary things, whereas Torah, Mitzvos and the Jewish people are eternal . . .*

## **"Be Strong and Courageous"**

Miraculously, after just ten days in Kostroma, the *Rebbe* was freed, and allowed to leave Russia, thanks to the efforts of a

<sup>14</sup> Citing Shlomo HaMelech's prayer upon the dedication of the Beis HaMikdash (*Melachim* I 8:57).

<sup>15</sup> Citing *Tehillim* 105:15.



**Rabbi Mordechai Dubin**, a Lubavitcher *Chasid* and member of the Latvian Parliament traveled to Moscow to negotiate with the Soviet authorities

Lubavitcher *Chasid* named Mordechai Dubin, who served as a member of the Latvian Parliament. The Parliament had a pending vote on a major trade deal with Russia, and a diplomatic crisis involving Russia, England and Poland led to a great deal of controversy within Latvia regarding the deal. Dubin used this situation to his advantage, leveraging his support for the deal to secure the Russian government's release of the *Rebbe*. He traveled to Moscow to negotiate with the Soviet authorities, who reluctantly acquiesced. On *Isru Chag Sukos* of that year, the *Rebbe* and his family left Russia for Riga, the capital of Latvia.

During the train ride out of Russia, the *Rebbe* wrote the following letter to his *Chassidim* in Russia, which included the following expression of his great love and concern for them:

*As water reflects a face, my heart is awake and feels the pure sweetness and power of the inner and essential bond of the entire community of chassidim to the Tree of Life...*

*Each and every one of you, you and your wives, your sons and daughters, your grandchildren—your physical wellbeing, education, conduct and spiritual direction deeply affect me to the inner core of my heart.*

*My faith shall strengthen me and be my comfort, that physical distance shall never, ever separate us, Gd forbid... Each of you Chassidim, along with your families, should set your minds and hearts to strengthen the thread that binds us, which is service of Gd...*

*May Gd delight my heart and yours, in seeing children and grandchildren engaging with Torah and Mitzvos, with abundant means physically and spiritually. May Gd raise the glory of Torah and the service of Gd, and the glory of our Jewish brethren, that they may live with all good, from soul to body.*



Poster announcing the *Rebbe's* arrival in Yerushalayim

*It would be very pleasurable to me to hear at every occasion of the wellbeing of all of you and your families, and what is happening with each of them, specifically and in detail. As I said, all their concerns, both physical and spiritual, reach the deep core of my heart, which is completely dedicated to your spiritual and physical good. Be strong and courageous, you and your families, to walk in the trodden path of light. . . May it be good for you and your families forever. May Gd help us to see each other in full happiness...*

Thanks to Dubin's efforts, the *Rebbe* was allowed to take with him most of his extensive library. He was an ardent bibliophile, collecting a large number of books and manuscripts, which were very precious to him, and he brought these with him out of Russia.

## Eretz Yisrael and the U.S.

In 1929, after a relatively brief period in Riga, during which he opened a Yeshiva, the *Rebbe* traveled to *Eretz Yisrael*. This tour of *Eretz Yisrael* included a trip to Chevron, just days before the tragic Chevron massacre on *Shabbos*, Av 18, 1929. Because of his special status of distinction, he was granted permission to enter the building of *Me'aras HaMachpelah*, despite the long-standing policy of the Arab caretakers not to allow Jews beyond the seventh step to the compound.

After his trip to *Eretz Yisrael*, the *Rebbe* sailed to the United States, where he stayed for ten months. He received an official civic welcome upon his arrival in New York. During these ten months, he visited Jewish communities not only in New York, but in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Boston,



**Arriving  
in the US, 1929**



**Visit to US, 1929**



Milwaukee, Chicago, St. Louis, Detroit and Washington, where he met with President Herbert Hoover. He expended great efforts to strengthen religious commitment among American Jewry, and to raise money for the beleaguered Jewish communities in Russia.

It was reported that during his visit to St. Louis, he was speaking in a *Shul* when a woman in the ladies' section began loudly banging and shouting. She told the *Rebbe* that the local *Mikveh* was in disrepair, and the community leaders did not want to put in the money to rebuild it. Right there and then, the *Rebbe* made an appeal, and funds were provided for the *Mikveh*'s repair.

The *Rebbe* set sail from the United States back to Riga in the summer of 1930, not realizing that he would soon need another miracle to get him out of Europe.

## Miraculous Escape From the European Inferno

In 1934, after spending a number of years in Riga, the *Rebbe* moved to Warsaw, Poland, a teeming city which was home

to some 2.5 million Jews at that time. While leading his institutions in

Poland, the *Rebbe* continued raising money for the Jews back in Russia. Two years later, he moved to the resort town of Otvock, situated some fifteen miles from Warsaw. The *Rebbe* was in failing health, having already suffered two strokes, and also being stricken with multiple sclerosis, and so he left the crowd, noise, and commotion of Warsaw so he could benefit from the tranquility and clean, fresh air of Otvock, and he established a Yeshiva there.<sup>16</sup>

Three years later, on Friday morning, September 1, 1939, World War II erupted, with German planes bombing all major Polish cities. This was a relentless assault, resulting in the collapse of countless buildings, and an estimated 30,000 deaths—before the Germans even occupied the country.<sup>17</sup> The larger cities were generally considered safer than the smaller towns, as there was more infrastructure and more places to hide, and so the *Rebbe* made the dangerous trip from Otvock back to Warsaw.

<sup>16</sup> My grandfather, Dov Berish Loketch, lived in the northern Polish city of Ciechanov, and during one of my trips to Israel, I visited the Ciechanov Yeshiva in Yerushalayim. I asked the *Menabel* if he knew of any elderly Ciechanov natives, and he gave me the name of a ninety-year-old man who was living in a home for the elderly in Tel-Aviv. I went to visit him—his name was *Yisrael*—and we talked. He reminisced about the old country, and he also tested me on *Tanach* and chided me for not knowing enough . . . During our conversation, I asked him whether he knew my father's two cousins who grew up in Ciechanov, and I mentioned their names.

"Of course!" he said. "They were in my class. I knew them well."

These cousins both survived the war. One then went to Israel, and the other to the United States. Neither remained religiously observant. I asked *Yisrael* why, in his estimation, my father's two cousins did not remain observant while he did, given that they both received the same education in the same community of Alexander *Chassidim*.

He explained that back then, most boys went out to work after their *Bar Mitzvah*. Either they joined the family business, or they found an apprenticeship. Only boys from wealthy or rabbinic families continued learning.

"My father was a *Ballabus*," *Yisrael* told me, "but a friend of his warned him that if he wanted me to remain committed, he needed to send me to Yeshiva, and he did. That's why I stayed observant. You can't stay *Frum* just by attending elementary school and then having private tutors. You need to go to Yeshiva."

He then pulled out his picture from Yeshiva, *Yeshiva Tomchei Temimim* in Otvosk, the Yeshiva founded by Rav Yosef Yitzchak.

<sup>17</sup> My father *ב"ר* grew up in Warsaw, and four of his five sisters worked in other parts of the city. All four perished during the Germans' bombing. My father ran from one building to the next, and at one point he passed by a young woman who was lying on the ground, her leg severed. She asked him to find a stone and strike her on the head so she would die. My father, horror-stricken and unsure what to do, just kept running.

**Helmuth Wholthat,**  
the point person in Germany



**Ernst Bloch** traveled to  
Warsaw with two other  
officers.

The bombings continued until *Erev Sukos*. It is told that the Brisker *Rav*<sup>18</sup>, who was in Warsaw at this time, received word before the end of the assault that Rav Yitzchak Yosef had an *Esrog* for him, but he was staying in a different part of the city, well over an hour walk from the Brisker *Rav*. A certain Gerrer *Chasid* offered to take the perilous trip, eager to have the privilege of bringing an *Esrog* for the esteemed Brisker *Rav*. After thinking for a moment, the Brisker *Rav* decided that if somebody was willing to risk his life to enable him to perform a *Mitzvah*, he should not stop him.

The *Chasid* left at around 9:00 pm, and returned in the middle of the night, at around 4:00 am. He explained that each time he reached the place where he thought Rav Yosef Yitzchak was staying, he was told that the area was bombed and the *Rebbe* needed to relocate somewhere else. Time and time again, when the *Chasid* arrived at where he was told the *Rebbe* had gone, he was informed that the *Rebbe* was forced to move. Finally, he found the *Rebbe*—who had brought with him the *Esrog* in order to ensure that the Brisker *Rav* would be able to fulfill this precious *Mitzvah*.

Whenever the Nazis occupied a Jewish area, their first priority was to find the leaders, the influential rabbis. And so after the Germans overran Poland, the SS and the Gestapo in Warsaw set out to find the city's leading rabbis, including Rav Yosef Yitzchak. This was no secret, and the *Rebbe* went into hiding. He would spend some time in one residence and then be secretly moved to another, in order to avoid detection. Meanwhile, the entire Jewish world, all around the globe, knew that the *Rebbe's* life was in immediate danger and that every effort must be made to rescue him.

Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson, the *Rebbe's* leading emissary in the United States, together with several members of his *Shul* in Brooklyn, hired a Washington lobbyist named Max Rhoades

to convince American government officials to act. Rhoades lobbied Ben Cohen, an advisor to President Roosevelt, to get involved in the cause. Cohen had recalled that a diplomat named Robert Pell had attended a conference in Berlin, in 1938, and befriended a German counterpart named Helmuth Wholthat. He contacted Pell, who promptly sent a message to U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull, informing him that Wholthat had assured him to help any cause of concern to American Jewry. The United States, at this point, maintained neutrality with respect to the conflict in Europe, and Germany had an interest in keeping the U.S. out of the war. (Of course, the U.S. joined the war after Japan, Germany's ally, bombed Pearl Harbor in December, 1941.)

Wholthat saw the rescue of the *Rebbe* as a small price to pay for staying on good terms with the U.S. The Roosevelt Administration, meanwhile, saw this cause as a “bone” to throw to American Jews who wanted the administration to help European Jewry.

Wholthat realized that the Gestapo and the SS, who were controlling Poland on the ground, took little interest in Germany's complex diplomatic considerations. They would not be prepared to allow a leading rabbi go free. And so Wholthat approached Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, head of the Abwehr, or German naval intelligence, who was known not to be a particularly committed Nazi. (In fact, in 1944, after the failed attempt to assassinate Hitler, several subordinates were implicated, and although there was no evidence that Canaris was involved, he was executed because of his suspected disloyalty.)

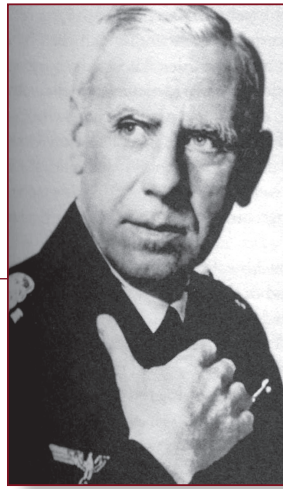
Canaris accepted this mission, and he instructed one of his highest-ranking officers—whose father happened to have been Jewish—that, at the behest of the U.S. government, he was to arrange the rescue of the *Rebbe*. He said, “You're

<sup>18</sup> Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik, 1886-1959.



**Admiral Wilhelm Canaris,**  
**head of the *Abwehr*, German naval intelligence,**  
ordered Bloch to avoid the Gestapo and SS:

"You're going to go up to Warsaw and you're going to find the most *ultra*-Jewish Rabbi in the world, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, and you're going to rescue him. You can't miss him, he looks just like Moses."



going to go up to Warsaw and you're going to find the most *ultra*-Jewish Rabbi in the world, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, and you're going to rescue him. You can't miss him, he looks just like Moses." Canaris ordered the officer to avoid the Gestapo and SS, and ensure they never learn about their mission.

This officer, Ernst Bloch, traveled to Warsaw with two other officers. They went around, dressed in Nazi uniforms, asking Jews about the Rebbe's whereabouts, but of course, everyone denied having any knowledge. Information was cabled to the U.S. from the *Rebbe's* emissaries in Riga that the *Rebbe* was staying at 29 Bonifraterska St. Bloch and his men went to that address—only to find that the building had been destroyed.

Finally, the officers obtained more accurate information, and they knocked on the door where the *Rebbe* was staying. An elderly *Chasid* opened the door, visibly frightened, and Bloch explained to him that he and his men had received orders to bring the *Rebbe* out of Poland to safety. The *Chasid* denied any knowledge of the *Rebbe's* whereabouts, and Bloch and his men left. But the *Rebbe* instructed his family and the others with him that if Bloch returned, they should tell him the truth. It seems that the *Rebbe* had received word from Riga that there were German officers assigned the mission of rescuing him.

Sure enough, Bloch returned with his men, and they knocked down the door. They told the *Rebbe* that he needed to make the decision of whether or not to trust them, and he said that he would go with them. The officers took his family and several others, eighteen people in all.<sup>19</sup>

The next dilemma which Bloch faced was how to smuggle eighteen clearly-identifiable

*Chassidic* Jews out of Poland. He had them board trucks, and decided he would bring them to Berlin, claiming they were his prisoners and he was on a secret mission. At every checkpoint, the SS officers were suspicious. On one occasion, Bloch threatened the inspector, warning that he would report him to his superior. The plan worked, and they reached Berlin, where the *Rebbe* stayed in the Jewish Community Center. Bloch then escorted the *Rebbe* and his group to the Latvian border. They proceeded to Riga, where they waited until they received visas to the United States.

This next stage marked yet another formidable challenge. The U.S. had placed strict quotas on immigration, and the *Rebbe* was in very poor health, making him an undesirable prospect. And, the head of the State Department's Visa Section was Breckenridge Long, an anti-Semite who advocated for very strict limitations on immigration, thereby preventing many Jews from escaping the Holocaust. Long strongly opposed granting the *Rebbe* a visa, but the administration came under pressure from influential figures such as Justice Brandeis and Ben Cohen. Those lobbying for the issuance of a visa pointed to an exemption in the quota laws for a minister which an active congregation and a bank account with \$5000. Eventually, Long reluctantly issued the visa.

The voyage across the Atlantic, too, was dangerous, as the waters were patrolled by German U-boats. Twice during the trip, German naval troops boarded the *Rebbe's* ship in search for ammunition.

<sup>19</sup> The *Rebbe's* daughter and son-in-law, Chanah and Rav Shemaryahu Gurary, left Poland with the *Rebbe*. Another daughter, Sheina Horenstein, and her husband, Rav Menachem Mendel Horenstein (1905-1942), were Polish citizens, and were thus ineligible for immigration to the U.S. because of U.S. immigration laws. They perished in Treblinka. The *Rebbe's* other daughter, Chayah Mushka, and her husband, the seventh Lubavitcher *Rebbe* (Rav Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, 1902-1994), were in France when the war broke out, and they managed to escape to the U.S. in 1940.

## Arrival in America



On *Adar Bet* 9, 1940, after a twelve-day voyage, the *Rebbe* arrived in New York Harbor, where he was greeted by a large assembly of *Chassidim* and prominent figures.

Bloch, the naval intelligence officer who heroically brought the *Rebbe* out of Poland, ended up being killed in battle against the Russian army near Berlin just before the end of the war, on April 30, 1945, the day Hitler committed suicide.

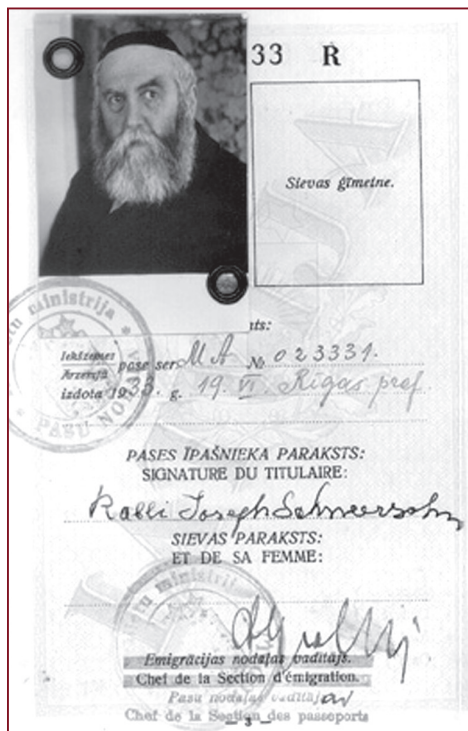
Helmut Wholthat, the German diplomat who arranged and oversaw the rescue operation, went to the United States and opened a consulting business in New York, while traveling back and forth to Germany. He never told his family about this secret operation.

The *Rebbe* was very ill when he arrived in New York. He stayed for some time in the Greystone Hotel where he rested

and recuperated. He spent *Pesach* that year in Lakewood, and

then, in *Elul*, he moved to Crown Heights, to 770 Eastern Parkway, which has, of course, been the world headquarters of Chabad ever since. During the next ten years, until his passing on *Shevat* 10, 1950, despite his progressively deteriorating health, he worked arduously to build the Chabad movement in the U.S. He sent emissaries throughout the country, and established a network of day schools, before *Torah Umesorah* began its day school program.<sup>20</sup>

The *Rebbe* was a prolific writer. He kept a detailed diary throughout his life, and he wrote down all his *Derashos*. He wrote hundreds upon hundreds of *Ma'amarim*, essays on *Chassidic* thought and teachings, enough to fill several bookshelves. These texts are a cherished and seminally important part of the corpus of Chabad Torah literature.



**The Rebbe Rayatz with  
his son-in-law, the next  
Lubavitcher Rebbe**

<sup>20</sup> One of the schools founded by the *Rebbe* was the Lubavitch Day School in Boston, which opened in 1944 with twelve students, and which I attended until sixth grade.



“בִּאתִי לְגַנִּי”

## The Rebbe Rayatz's Final *Ma'amar* and Enduring Legacy

Presented by Rav Chaim Gershon Steinmetz,  
Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Lubavitch, Detroit

**T**HROUGHOUT MOST of the Rebbe Rayatz's years in New York, he had difficulty speaking. Beyond his other health issues, he suffered a debilitating stroke in 1942, which compromised his ability to speak. When people came to meet with him, he needed an interpreter with which to communicate, because he was hard to understand. The Rebbe rarely addressed his *Chassidim* directly, and would instead occasionally write *Ma'amarim* that were printed for the *Chassidim* to learn over *Shabbos*.

For several years, he would write a special *Ma'amar* to commemorate the *Yahrtzeit* of his grandmother, *Rebbetzin* Rivkah, the wife of the *Maharash*<sup>21</sup>, which was *Shevat* 10. The last year of the Rebbe's life, *Shevat* 10 fell on *Shabbos Parshas Bo*, and he sent out a *Ma'amar* to be printed before *Shabbos*. The Rebbe suffered another stroke *Shabbos* morning, and then passed away.

This *Ma'amar*, known as “מאמר באתי לגני”, is regarded by Lubavitch *Chassidim* as a kind of *Tzava'ah* (last will and testament). Indeed, towards the end of the *Ma'amar*, the Rebbe speaks of the importance of regular introspection,

adding, “מי הוא היודע עתו וזמנו”, nobody knows when his life will end, and he cites the *Midrash*'s comment<sup>22</sup>:

“אין אדם שליט לומר המתינו לי עד שאעשה חשבונותי ועד שאצווה לביתי.”

*“A person is not in control to say, ‘Wait for me until I make my calculations, and until I instruct my family.’”*

The *Chassidim* viewed this as a manifestation of the Rebbe's “רוח הקודש”, as a premonition that he would be leaving the world that *Shabbos*.

One of the points developed in this *Ma'amar*, I believe, truly captures the essence of the Rebbe's work, particularly during the last ten years of his life.

The Rebbe opened his essay with the *Pasuk* in *Shir HaShirim* (5:1), “בִּאתִי לְגַנִּי אֶחָתִי כֵּלָה”, “I have come to my garden, my sister, the bride.” The *Midrash*<sup>23</sup>, commenting on this *Pasuk*, teaches that at the time of the world's creation, the *Shechinah* was present here in this world, but due to people's sins, the *Shechinah* retreated.

With each generation, the *Shechinah* pulled away one level, until it was removed from all “שבעה רקיעים”, seven heavenly realms. But through the work of the seven

<sup>21</sup> Rav Shmuel Schneersohn, the fourth Lubavitcher Rebbe, 1834-1882 (son of the *Tzemach Tzedek*).

<sup>22</sup> *Devarim Rabah* 9:3.

<sup>23</sup> *Shir HaShirim Rabah* 5:1.





*Tzadikim*—Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Levi, Kehas, Amram and Moshe—the *Shechinah* returned, one realm at a time, until it again rested here in our world.<sup>24</sup> During the time of the last of these seven *Tzadikim*—Moshe *Rabbeinu*—the *Mishkan* was built as the site of the *Shechinah*'s presence here in this world. This, then, is the meaning of “בְּאֵתִי לְגַנִּי,” “I have come to My garden”: that *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* has come to His “garden,” once again taking residence in this world, in the *Mishkan*.

The *Rebbe* proceeds to analyze several aspects of the *Mishkan*, and how they are reflected in our *Avodas HaShem*. As the *Shelah HaKadosh*<sup>25</sup> and others have noted, when *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* proclaimed, “וְעָשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם,” “They shall make for Me a sanctuary, and I shall dwell in their midst,”<sup>26</sup> this refers to His residing “בְּתוֹךְ כָּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד”—within each and every one of us. Thus, everything associated with the construction of the *Mishkan* and the offering of *Korbanos* provides us with instruction for our day-to-day service of *HaShem*, showing us how to bring Him into our lives and into our beings.

The *Rebbe* here discusses the “עֲצֵי שִׁטִּים,” the acacia wood used for the planks of the *Mishkan*. The word “שִׁטִּים,” he explains, is related to the word “שטות” (*foolishness*). The *Gemara* (*Sotah* 3a), as the *Rebbe* cites, teaches, “אִין אָדָם עוֹבֵר, עֲבִירָה אֵלָא אִם כֵּן נִכְנָס בּוֹ רוּחַ שְׁטוּת” “A person does not commit a sin unless a ‘spirit of foolishness’ enters within him.”

The *Rebbe* elaborates on this concept of “רוח שטות,” emphasizing that “זֶה לְעֵמֶת זֶה עֲשָׂה” “הֶאֱלָקִים” (*Kobeles* 7:14) everything negative has a positive counterpart (and vice versa).

Just as there is a “רוח שטות” that causes one to stumble

and transgress, the *Rebbe* explains, there is also a “שטות דקדושה”—“sacred foolishness.”

The *Rebbe* noted as an example of this concept the *Gemara*'s remark in *Kesubos* 17a that Rav Shmuel bar Rav Yitzchak would juggle *Hadasim* at weddings, and Rabbi Zeira bemoaned that such conduct causes embarrassment to the Torah scholars. But later, after Rav Shmuel bar Rav Yitzchak passed away, a pillar of fire appeared, demonstrating his unique stature of piety. Rabbi Zeira then retracted his criticism of Rav Shmuel bar Rav Yitzchak's conduct, exclaiming, “אֶהְיֶה לִיה שְׁטוּתִיה לְסָבָא”: “The old man's ‘foolishness’ benefitted him.”

This juggling, the *Rebbe* writes, was “שטות דקדושה”. He explains that sometimes, what is needed is for a person to put aside his own will, and even his rational considerations, all his practical *Cheshbonos* (“calculations”), and just “jump into the water,” without thinking. The *Mishkan* was built from “עֲצֵי שִׁטִּים,” the *Rebbe* writes, because it was built through “שטות דקדושה”, through the suspension of logical considerations, which is how we ultimately bring down the *Shechinah* into this world.

<sup>24</sup> The *Chassidim* took this citation of the *Midrash* as an allusion that the seven *Rebbes* of Chabad, too, would bring the *Shechinah* back to our world, culminating with the arrival of *Mashiach*.

<sup>25</sup> Rav Yeshayah Horowitz, d. 1630.

<sup>26</sup> *Shemos* 25:8.



Applying this concept to our lives, the *Rebbe* writes that sometimes we need to put aside and transcend our rational calculations. When it's time to *Daven*, for example, we are to overlook our normal

concerns, because this is what we need to do. Sometimes we have to push away the world in order to achieve *Kedushah*.

The *Rebbe's* son-in-law and successor, the last Lubavitcher *Rebbe*, once observed at a *Farbrengen* commemorating the *Rayatz's Yahrtzeit* that the *Rayatz* went through three different periods in his life after becoming *Rebbe* in 1920. The first years were spent in Russia, where he displayed his *מסירת נפש* by openly and brazenly defying the Soviet regime, even taunting Soviet officials.

The second stage was the period after his expulsion from Russia in 1928, when he settled in Poland, and started over from scratch. Poland already had large *Chassidic* movements—especially Ger and Alexander—but the *Rebbe*, coming from Russia with nothing, built a flourishing Chabad movement there in Poland, against all odds.

The third stage was his final ten years, which he spent in the United States. He was sick and frail, he lost part of his family and most of his *Chassidim*, and he faced the challenge of building *Chassidus* in the materialistic, superficial American

society. In any of these situations, a person working just with reason would not have even tried, but the *Rebbe*, with his extraordinary, boundless *Mesirus Nefesh*, did not despair, and, doing what ratio-

nally seemed impossible, succeeded despite the enormous obstacles he faced, because this is what *Klal Yisrael* needed.

This observation, I believe, is consistent with the message of "שטות דקדושה" expressed in "באתי לגני". The *Rayatz* undertook these missions without rational considerations, knowing that this was what was needed during those critical periods in the history of *Klal Yisrael*.

The final *Rebbe* saw "מאמר באתי לגני" as his predecessor's *Tzava'ah*, and referenced it often. This message of "שטות דקדושה" laid the groundwork for the extraordinary work done by the *Rebbe* and his followers to this very day, with *Shluchim* spreading *Yiddishkeit* to the remotest places on earth, kindling the spark of *Kedushah* within Jews in whom this would never have been thought possible.

**THE REMARKABLE, BOUNDLESS** *Mesirus Nefesh* of the *Rebbe Rayatz* continues to serve as a source of inspiration for thousands of *Chassidim* who devote themselves tirelessly and selflessly to disseminate Torah and prepare us for the coming of *Mashiach Tzidkeinu*, אמן, במהרה בימינו, 🌹

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