

The Jewish Weekly

We Received Your Invitation with Displeasure

By Rabbi Yisrael Shemtov

My Bar Mitzvah was in 1953, just two years after the Rebbe accepted the leadership of the Lubavitch movement. On the invitation they sent out for the occasion, my parents requested that the invitees come to the celebration and “bless the Bar Mitzvah boy to grow up in accordance with the wish and the desire of the Rebbe.”

At that time, our family lived in London, where my father knew a brilliant Torah scholar in his twenties named Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch. Rabbi Sternbuch was born in London, but since he had come up in the Lithuanian yeshivah world, people knew him as the “Lithuanian prodigy.” Later, he would become the head of the Eida HaChareidis rabbinic body in Israel, and one of the preeminent Torah figures in the country.

But one day in 1953, as we were all walking home together from the synagogue, this prodigy was criticizing my father. “How dare you write such a thing?” he demanded to know. It would make sense for parents to ask for people to bless their child to grow in accordance with the desire of the Almighty, or the laws of the Torah, but “how can you wish for your child’s future, their whole life, to follow the desire of the Rebbe – a human being?”

“I would ask the Rebbe what he has to say about this,” continued Rabbi Sternbuch, “but I lost the invitation.”

“No problem, I’ll give you another invitation,” my father reassured him. Rabbi Sternbuch promptly sent it on to the Rebbe, with his question attached.

The Rebbe responded to him in a letter with a few points. First, he explained, “The more specifically a person articulates his requests that he makes in prayer the better. This is why the Amidah contains twelve intermediate blessings,” where we pray specifically for all our needs, rather than one all-encompassing request.”

“It follows,” continued the Rebbe, “that if someone... believes that he has a friend who sincerely wishes him well and understands his needs more deeply and accurately than he himself does, he may formulate his prayer by asking that they be fulfilled in accordance with that person’s intention and desire.”

Then the Rebbe added a second point, which is that when a person wishes – in line with the traditional chasidic blessing for a Bar Mitzvah boy – that his son grow to have

“awe of Heaven, and not only that, but also that he become a chasid ... and not only that, but also that he become a Torah scholar,” the “evil inclination” can come along and interfere with the purity of this prayer by mixing in an ulterior motive. That is, besides being driven by the spiritual elements in these blessings, a parent might also seek the sense of personal gratification that comes from having a child with all of these qualities.

“The only solution,” proposed the Rebbe, “is to entrust one’s prayer to someone who has no personal stake in the matter and sincerely seeks one’s [true] good.” Then, when the words of the prayer and its inner intention are properly aligned, they will be accepted on High.

Lastly, he addressed Rabbi Sternbuch’s suggestion that the “prayer should simply be that one should fulfill G-d’s will,” without specifying the particulars of which path the child will follow. “With all due respect, this is not so,” insisted the Rebbe. “As noted above, the very text of the prayers instituted by the Men of the Great Assembly demonstrates that requests should be specified in as much detail as possible. The only reason they did not formulate them in even greater detail is so that there would be a single liturgy for all Jews. Nevertheless, even the standardized text is highly detailed.”

Throughout, the Rebbe made references to various Halachic concepts, in order to provide precedents in Jewish law for the arguments he was making to Rabbi Sternbuch. Then, in closing, he remarked that, “To be honest, I wasn’t sure whether I should respond to these questions,” because some people only want to have questions – which they can then use as a justification for rejecting a chasidic way of life. And since there are always more questions they can ask, there is little point in offering answers to such people. “However, since I do not know you,” the Rebbe continued, “I will presume that “your intentions are certainly for the best.”

Decades later, once I was married and raising my family in Crown Heights, I developed a relationship with a certain young man. He had come from abroad to study Torah, but it took a few months until he was accepted into a yeshivah, so I took him into our house and helped him get set up. Years later, after he got married, I noticed that this young couple had not been blessed with children. So the next time I sent a letter to the Rebbe, I decided to write a P.S., asking that he give them a blessing for children.

About an hour and a half after I delivered this letter, the Rebbe’s secretary, Rabbi Binyomin Klein, called me on the phone. “The Rebbe is asking for the names of the mothers of this husband and wife.” When praying for

It Once Happened...

someone, one traditionally uses their Hebrew name and that of their mother. I quickly called this young man to ask him, and then I called Rabbi Klein back with the names.

Another hour or so went by, and Rabbi Klein called back: In response to the request for a blessing, the Rebbe was advising the couple to be more careful in observing the laws of Family Purity. These laws, which guide the marital conduct between a husband and wife, contain many details that, as Rabbi Klein explained, someone might easily forget.

With that, I called the young man back to pass the message on. “I’m just the mailman, and this is what I have for you,” I told him.

“I’m not sure what the Rebbe could be referring to,” he replied, “but I’m going to review all the laws of Family Purity and see what I might be missing.”

Nine months later, I served as the sandek at their son’s circumcision ceremony – and the couple had ten more children after that.

Afterwards, this young man confided in me that he had written to the Rebbe for his blessing for children twenty times, without getting a response – and he hadn’t left out his mother’s name either. So it was interesting that when I scribbled my little P.S., the blessing had come almost immediately, and everything went smoothly after that.

There are a few morals to this story, if I may say so, and I think that one of them is based on that answer the Rebbe gave about my Bar Mitzvah invitation: When a person asks for a blessing for themselves, for children or for anything else, there can be a personal interest alongside the spiritual dimension of the blessing, and so it doesn’t always have the desired effect.

But when you ask for someone else, when you pray for another person, for a brother or for a sister, it has that much more power.

Reprinted from Here’s My Story, www.myencounterblog.com.

Editor’s Note: Rabbi Yisroel Shemtov is a longtime Crown Heights community activist, who for many years ran a bespoke frock-coat (kapota) business.

He spearheaded and runs till today the Main Simchat Beit Hashoevah event in Crown Heights, every night of Sukkot

He was interviewed in December 2010.



Shabbat Times – Parshat Ki Teitzei

	Candle Lighting	Motzei Shabbat	Motzei Shabbat ר"ת
Jerusalem	6:41	7:53	8:33
Tel Aviv	6:56	7:56	8:30
Haifa	6:48	7:56	8:33
Be'er Sheva	6:58	7:55	8:32

The Infamous Circle of Blood

By Rabbi Yerachmiel Tilles

Rabbi Yehudah Petayah was ordained as a rabbi and teacher of Jewish law already at the age of 17. He also was the foremost disciple in Kabbalah studies of Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Baghdad (best known as the Ben Ish Chai) who was considered by many to be the greatest kabbalist of his generation. R. Petayah later moved to Jerusalem and became one of the leading kabbalists of the city.

During his life, he tried to hide his greatness in Kabbalah. But when he arrived in Jerusalem, Rabbi Avraham Adas came to him and said: "you wrote a commentary on the Idrah Rabba [section of the Zohar]. Why do you not publish it yet?"

Instead of answering, Rabbi Petayah responded: "From where does your honor know this secret? It has been almost twenty years and I have not told any human being except my father".

Rabbi Adas tried to avoid answering him, but after being pressed by R. Petayah he replied: "the holy Tanna (sage of the Mishna), Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (who was also the source of the teachings of the Zohar) came to me in a dream and told me: a great rabbi and immense kabbalist is coming from Bavel (Iraq). He wrote a commentary on the Idrah Rabba and out of great humility, did not publish it. Tell him that I want him to publish it and press him to publish it."

Once while visiting Rachel's tomb in Bethlehem, Rabbi Petayah said that he saw Mother Rachel and that she is actually buried near the tomb, not under it. Her body is completely intact as one who is sleeping and she is very beautiful. He added also that she is not buried parallel to the tomb, but rather at a diagonal direction from it.

R. Yehudah Petayah was very much in contact with the spirit world. He was a master at detecting the presence of spirits and demons, as well as an expert in the art of exorcism, and has told of many of his experiences in communicating with souls of the dead, exorcisms, demons and other supernatural phenomena. He also knew how to test a person to see if he was deluded and imagining things that are not true or really was having an other-worldly experience. Many of these incredible experiences are documented in his book "Minchat Yehuda" (Hebrew).

R. Petayah also became famous in Baghdad, and later in Jerusalem, for the depth of his knowledge of invocations and amulets, and for being the uncontested master in the writing of kosher Kameot (amulets). He would heal the sick, using both mystical and known methods. These amulets were also used for protection, peace in the home, fertility, wisdom, and many other things.

The famous kabbalist and miracle man, Rabbi Yitzhak Kaduri studied this art of writing of kosher Kameot under Rabbi Petayah. According to Rabbi Yitzhak Batzri, a young Jerusalem-based kabbalist and grandson of R. Petayah, R. Petayah refused to teach anyone who

could not read foreheads. (i.e. to be able to see the Hebrew letters and lights appearing on a person's forehead. This requires a very high spiritual level. The explanation is that every person's soul is like a Torah scroll and he can rectify or damage "letters" which then appear on his forehead.)

Rabbi Ariel Tzadok writes: my own teacher, HaRav Meir Levi zt'l told me that when he was a child he had met Rabbi Yehudah, and when Rabbi Yehudah cast his eyes upon him, he ran out of the room. I asked Rabbi Meir why he had run; he responded that he was afraid, because Rabbi Yehudah's eyes were so intense.

Rabbi Yehudah Petayah said regarding himself that he was the reincarnation of Rabbi Yechezkel ben Yehudah Landau (!), a great Ashkenazi authority in Torah Law, author of the responsa, "Noda B'Yehuda". R. Petayah said that even though in his last lifetime he was a tzaddik and pious man, he had to descend into a body again because he did not fulfill his Torah obligation to study Kabbalah. Therefore, in this life, the study of Kabbalah was his main focus and tikkun (soul-rectification). He also authored a number of other works on Kabbalah including commentaries to the Zohar and Etz Chaim of the Arizal.

Probably, the most important and famous episode regarding Rabbi Petayah was his involvement with the infamous "Circle of Blood." According to the August 14, 1987 issue of the Jerusalem Post Magazine, during WWII (while the German army was preparing to invade Israel from Egypt), Rabbi Petayah persuaded the British Command in Israel to give him and two others the use of a plane and a pilot.

Once all were aboard, he instructed the pilot to fly a large circle completely around Israel (including parts of Egypt) while Rabbi Petayah performed "kaparot" - the traditional slaughtering of a chicken performed early in the morning prior to Yom Kippur for atonement. The bloods of the chickens were thrown out of the plane. Rabbi Petayah thus made a Circle of Blood surrounding Israel. [There was also recited on the plane a special form of the Tikun Haketoret (rectification by the incense offerings of the temple) with Biblical verses, etc., which R. Petayah composed].

While some might think this an act of desperation, it seemed to have served its purpose. The author of the article quotes the pilot of this plane as saying:

"Shortly afterwards, Rommel (the German commander of WWII) attacked. The soldiers in the mess hall kept kidding us: 'Fat lot of good those chickens of yours have done', they joked. But they were wrong -- it was Rommel's last fling! Three weeks later came Montgomery's advance from El Alamein. The rest is history.

"Mind you," concluded the pilot, "I wouldn't have believed it had I not flown the mission myself".

The lesson of the story, declared R. Ariel Tzadok: Do not underestimate the power of a Kabbalist, especially one of the caliber of Rabbi Yehudah Petayah zt'l.

Reprinted from the "Hidden Tzadikim" section on www.dafyomi.co.il.



A teacher's mistake once caused a national catastrophe.

This week's Parsha of Ki Teitzei gives us the Mitzvah, 'תמחה את זכר עמלק מתחת השמים לא תשכח', 'Wipe out all remembrance of the Amalekites from under the heavens – never forget'.

A nice commentary I read from The Chief Rabbi of England and the Commonwealth, Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis says, that in the days of King David, as is recorded in the first book of Kings, he asked Yoav, the Chief of Staff of his army, to fight against the Amalekites. And it took Yoav six months in order to be victorious. At the end of those six months, he came back to King David and triumphantly he declared, "I have killed all the males of Amalek".

King David said to Yoav, "are you not aware of the Mitzvah in the Torah where Hashem commands us to wipe out the entire people of Amalek – they are the ultimate evil that can ever be on the face of the earth, their very presence will plague good people for the rest of time".

And Yoav said, "but the Torah only talks about the males". King David says, "where?"

As is recorded in the Gemarah, Mesechet Bava Batra, Yoav pointed to the verse in our Parsha, 'תמחה את זכר'. King David said, "not 'זכר', meaning 'males', rather 'זכר', the 'remembrance' of them all".

Yoav was stunned. Suddenly he realized that when at school, he was taught incorrectly. He went out and he sought to find his teacher. Eventually, he located him. By now, the teacher was an old man. Yoav came into his home with a Sefer Torah, he opened it up, he pointed to the verse and he said to the teacher "read it!". And the teacher read, 'תמחה את זכר ... זכר' and not 'זכר', the 'males' and not the 'remembrance' – different vowel points.

And Yoav was so angry, he took out his sword and he had to be restrained from actually killing his teacher.

The fact that the Talmud reveals the story to us is a message all about the quality of education. Of course, we must have as many schools as possible, and we must populate them with as many pupils as possible. But together with that, we should never compromise on the standard of Jewish education.

When a teacher or a parent makes a mistake, I don't think it's going to cause a national calamity, but nonetheless, we have a responsibility to always get it right.

So let's try to always get it right and let's pray with all our hearts, for our soldiers and healthcare professionals, and Chevra Kadisha members worldwide, and for those who need healing, shidduchim, children and parnassah and may we be blessed to have the most awesome, gorgeous, beautiful, peaceful, healthy, amazing, relaxed, spiritual, loving and sweet Shabbat.

Yoav

The Jewish Weekly's PARSHA FACTS

NUMBER OF MITZVOT: 74
MITZVOT ASEH: 27
MITZVOT LO TAASEH: 47

NUMBER OF PESUKIM: 110
NUMBER OF WORDS: 1582
NUMBER OF LETTERS: 5856

HAFTORA:
Yeshayahu 54:1-10 (רני עקרה) (this is the fifth of seven Haftorot, [the Seven Haftorot of Consolation] that precede Rosh Hashanah).

This week we study Chapter 2 of Pirkei Avot

פרשת כי תצא

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