

METAMORPHOSIS

THE JOURNEY AND TRANSFORMATION
OF A JEWISH SOUL

DR. VLADIMIR (ZEV) ZELENKO, M.D.

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Dr. Zelenko asked me to write a letter of endorsement to his autobiographical book, *Metamorphosis*. I will try to express some of the feelings I have when I think about Zev and his book.

I have known Dr. Zev Zelenko for several decades. There are many things I can say about him. I can write about his brilliance; his out-of-the-box approach to medicine; his dedication to *Yiddishkeit*, family and patients; his love for Torah, particularly the teachings of *Chassidus*; his *emunah and bitachon—faith and trust in G-d*; etc.

However, in Chabad Chassidic circles, the ultimate compliment is to call someone a *pnimi*. *Pnimi* is a difficult word to translate. Literally, it means an “inward” person. It is a person who is honest, sincere and not superficial. In the modern English vernacular, we would refer to a *pnimi* as “one who is for real.”

In Talmudic parlance, a *pnimi* is one who is *tocho-kibaro*: His inside is like his outside. The Talmud relates that in the academy of Rabbi Gamliel, there was a guard standing at the door who would allow entry only to a student who was *tocho-kibaro*.

The question is asked: How did the guard know what was in the hearts of those prospective students? One of the answers is that they did not let anyone in. Those who found a way of breaking down barriers and finding unconventional ways of getting in demonstrated that they were sincere: *tochom-kibarom*.

Zev has demonstrated how obstacles to his spiritual growth were only Divine instruments to elicit unconventional resources to get into Hashem's embrace. Zev takes G-d and *Yiddishkeit* seriously. What he does on the outside reflects who he is on the inside.

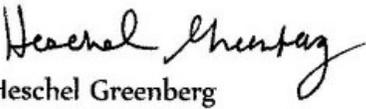
Zev's *pnimiyus* is a thread that runs through *Metamorphosis*. It would be an understatement to say that the book is inspiring. It is testimony to a Jewish soul's ability to transcend the externalities of life. It is a must-read for anyone who is sincerely interested in spiritual growth.

We are now standing on the threshold of the Final Redemption, when there will be a complete alignment between the physical and spiritual; the internal and external. The superficiality and falseness of *galus*—exile will be replaced with the truth of G-d permeating every fiber of existence. It is no accident that the word *pnimi* has the same *gematria* as the word *ketz*, which refers to the “End of Days.”

Internalizing the *pnimiyus* message of this book will go a long way toward preparing us for the time when the true *pnimiyus* of

every Jew, and indeed of all G-d's creation, will be revealed. It will bring with it total spiritual and physical health.

Wishing you a *refuah sheleimah u'krova* amongst all of Israel, *arichas yomim v'shanim tovim*, and a *kesivah vachasimah tovah*, *l'shana tovah umesukah!*


Heschel Greenberg

BS”D

FROM THE DESK OF SCHNEUR ZALMAN GAFNE

Eighth Day of Tishrei (the day King Solomon began initiation of the First Temple)

In every generation, there are certain Jewish souls that are merited from Above to be central representative figures indicating a key and leading theme in their generation. They’re living symbols of an essential and inherent uprising to the good, not only for *Yidden*, but for all mankind. I want to suggest that the author of this work, Zev, is one such symbolic *neshomo* (soul).

Born from *Yidden*, who were the remnants and survivors of two of the greatest destroyers of human lives history has ever known, Stalin and Hitler, Zev represents the young generation that sprouted out of the ruin, both physical and (perhaps more destructive) spiritual, rooted in the horrible desolation left by the two above, *yemach shemom*.

Throughout the huge expanses of the gradually collapsing Soviet Russia, young Jewish people and Jews in general began searching for their Divine roots as a people and for the eternal messages of the Torah, *Toras Moshe*, and its *mitzvos*. Some had less success than others due to the heavy wake of secularism and its crushing effect on anything spiritual. However, many

of the younger growing thinkers and searchers pushed their heads above the sea of ruin, beginning to breathe a “new” air.

The massive influence of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, on the life and people of Russia spurred this and helped it bud and bear fruit despite the odds.

True, Zev’s principal “return” was not in Russia itself, but in the free land of the United States, but the seeds of his restless yearning for an eternal and meaningful message were sown in Russia. Thus, he is the symbol of the whole re-creation of Russian Jewry, which continues to grow and spread to this day. The Lubavitcher Rebbe’s emissaries throughout Russia and those reaching out to other formerly Soviet *Yidden* are fanning the flames of the Divine fire, which is constantly spreading. The details of Zev’s finding and embracing his eternal roots have been mentioned here by other rabbis, thus leaving no need to elaborate here.

I just wish to draw a vivid picture of Zev’s determination, intensity and joy in his search for advanced Torah knowledge. I had the merit to be his teacher and mentor during his stay in our program in Kfar Chabad (the history of which is another story or chapter in the general “*teshuvah*” movement and the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s central role in it). In those days, I used to *daven Shacharis* (pray the morning service) with the students and “life-finders” of the program. Throughout the whole stay of Zev in the *yeshivah*, almost every day he would “watch” me carefully so that when I was taking off my *tefillin* after my

prayers (and by the way looking for a brief “breather” in my very demanding schedule), Zev would, with alacrity, appear at my side, saying: “Rabbi, I just have a question in what we learnt in *Chassidus* [Chassidic teaching learnt principally before prayer] and I have a couple of suggestions as to how to view the matter. Do you have a moment...?” How could I possibly refuse? Thus there would develop an usually lengthy conversation, with input from his side galore, which would “remove” my hopes of a slight “breather” between hectic parts of a generally hectic schedule. These moments indicate the thirst of our symbolic figure and were the beginnings of his development into the very learned Jew (also in kabbalah) that he is today.

In the light of the above, it’s not surprising—but rather part of the symbolism,—that Zev became a Doctor of Medicine of the first order. He is thus a man of “*refuah*”—healing. His rise to be a leading medical figure has made him not only the healer of bodily maladies, but a healer and guide of the soul to countless patients and other *Yidden* all over the U.S. He is a living example of the combination of profound religious conviction and remarkable skill in medicine and guidance—both bodily and spiritual. Thus, he’s been capable of contacting and becoming a leading influence in the lives of thousands of *Yidden* outside Lubavitch (to which he adheres passionately), for example, a large section of *Chassidei Satmar*, including their leading rabbis and revered leaders, for whom he is a devoted

doctor. Their lives and his have become interactive and inter-involved, leading to the much-yearned-for goal of *achdus* (oneness among fellow Jews), so vital to *Yidden* and the world in general. Once again, a symbolic nuance—“healing,” and all the *chesed* (caring kindness) that goes with it: goodness that will bring the Redemption, Moshiach, with G-d’s help.

Hashem should grant us all a good sweet year and help us live with the vibrant symbolic message of this living narrative—Zev’s book.

Schneur Zalman Gafne

RABBI SHIMON ZEV MEISELS

בעזהשי"ת יום ב' דסליחות לסדר "למען תחיה אתה

וזרעך" (פר' נצבים), שנת תשע"ח לפ"ק

לכבוד היקר באנשים ידיד כ"ל בית ישראל, שמו הטוב הולך לפניו, בהיותו
רופא מומחה המביא מזור ותרופה לחולי ישראל בעזרת רופא חולים,

מוה"ר זאב זעלענקא נרו יאיר ויזרח

לאורך ימים ושנים טובים, מתוך בריות גופא ונהורא מעליא.

א

בקראי המאמרים שכתבת, בהם אתה מגולל קורות ימי חיך, דברים היוצאים מן הלב,
אשר בהם ניכר היטב גבורת הנפש שלך, עד היכן פעל ועשה להוציא יקר עצמו מזולל,
ולעמוד איתן נגד כל המניעות והעיכובים בכל אורך הדרך, עד להקים בית נאמן בישראל,
ע"ד ישראל סבא בתורה וחסידות, בעזר ה' אלקי ישראל.

אשריך רבי זאב! שמך נאה לך ואתה נאה לשמך. כי הנקראים בשם "זאב", נוהגים לומר,
בסוף תפלת שמונה עשרה, את הפסוק (משלי י', ז'): "זכר צדיק לברכה ושם רשעים ירקב",
שבו מרומזים כל אשר עבר עליך. הן הדבקות בדרכי הצדיקים חסידים ואנשי מעשה אנשי
שם, ומוקירי רבנן ותלמידיהון, ובעשותך זאת קיימת מחציתו הראשון של הפסוק: "זכר
צדיק לברכה". ויתירה מזו, ההתבדלות המוחלטת מדרכי רשעים פורקי עול, כאשר זכית
לבחור מעצמך בחיים, ולהשליך מאחור כל עולם ההפקה, בכל עגפיה ופרטיה וסעיפה,
קיימת בזה המחצית השני של הפסוק: "ושם רשעים ירקב".

ומעז יצא מתוק, כי חזיתי איש היר במלאכתו, ומעולם לא היה לך פנאי להעלות כל זה
בכתב, ואך עתה אחר החולשה שעברה עליך, התפנית למלאכת הכתיבה, ועד כה אומנותך
היתה ברפואת הגופות, ומעכשיו התאמנת גם באומנות הכתיבה, אשר יתכן להיות רפואת
הנפש לעורר יהודים במצבים אלו, שילכו בעקבותיך ובעזהשי"ת גם הם יזכו לאור באור
החיים.

ולאות הכרת הטוב על כל החסד שעשית בעשרים השנים אשר אתה משרת את החרדים לדבר ה' בקרית יואל, כתבתי איזה גרגרים שעלו ברעיוני בענין זה.

ב

ראשית דבר, עצם הענין לכתוב על ספר, קורות ימי חיי האדם, מצינו כבר בספה"ק חובת הלבבות (בשער חשבון הנפש, חשבון י"א), וזה לשונו: "וכבר נאמר, כי הימים מגילות, כתבו בהם מה שתחפצו שיזכר לכם", עכ"ל. וכתב בפירוש טוב הלבנון (שם): "כי הימים מגילות, נגללים כמו מגלת ספר, וראוי שנכתוב מעשינו ומחשבותינו בכל יום הנגלל ועובה, כמו שאנו כותבים על המגלה", ע"כ. ובפשטות כוונתו, על דרך שנאמר (דברים ד', ל"ב): "שאל נא לימים ראשונים", וכדכתיב (דברים ל"ב, ז'): "זכור ימות עולם".

אכן עוד רמז יש בו, דאמר הכתוב (תהלים ע"א, ט"ז): "אבוא בגברות ה' אלקים אֶזְכִּיר צְדָקְתְּךָ לְבִדְךָ אֱלֹקִים לְמִדְתֵּי מַנְעוּרַי וְעַד הַנְּהָ אֶגִּיד נִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ. וְגַם עַד זִקְנָה וְשִׁיבָה אֱלֹקִים אֶל תַּעֲזָבֵי עַד אֶגִּיד זְרוּעֶךָ לְדוֹר לְכָל יְבוּא גְבוּרְתְּךָ". והיינו, כמו שאמרו חז"ל (נדה ל"א ע"א), אין בעל הנס מכיר בניסו. ופירש רש"י (במס' שבת דף י"ג ע"ב): "כמה נסים באים לנו, ואין אנו מכירין בהם".

ומצינו בדרשות חתם סופר (לשבת שובה), רעיון נפלא בזה, וזה לשונו: הנה הנסים הגדולים הנפלאים הניכרים וידועים, כקריעת ים סוף והדומה, הוא ניכר לכל. אך ניסים נסתרים שאין בעל הנס מכיר בהם, כגון הריגת ושתי, אין ספק שבעולם, שהיה זה הכנה לכל מה שנוולד אחריו. ושוב כמו ג' שנים אחר זה, נלקחה אסתר לבית המלך, ולא הרגיש אדם לאיזה סבה היה זה. ושוב איזה ימים אחר כך, קצף בגתן ותרש, והגידה למלך בשם מרדכי, הוא גם כן ענין שאין לו המשך עם כל הנ"ל. שוב גידל המלך את המן, ומי הבין מה יצמח מזה. עד לבסוף כשנעשה הנס הנפלא ההוא, המבין יבין, כי הריגת ושתי היה כעין קריעת ים סוף, אלא שאין בעל הנס מכיר בניסו.

והיינו דאיתא במס' נדה (דף ל"א ע"א): לעושה נפלאות גדולות לבדו (תהלים קל"ו ד'), שהקב"ה עושה נפלאות גדולות, שלא ידע אדם אלא הוא לבדו יודע.

"ומכל מקום מצוה על כל אדם, באחרית ימיו, לבחון כל אשר עשה ה' עמו מראשית צמיחתו עד אחריתו, ואיך נתגלגלו סבה וענינים, וְלִסְפָּרָם לבניו אחריו, גם הם יבחנו ויכירו

מעשה ה' הגדול אשר יעשה עמהם".

וזה: "אבוא בגבורות ה' אלקים", הם הנפלאות והנסים הגדולים, "אזכיר צדקתך לבדך", שבשעת מעשה לא היו ניכרים אלא לך לבדך, והיינו צדקתך לבדך, "וגם עד זקנה ושיבה אל תעזבני עד אגיד זרועך לדור לכל יבוא גבורתיך", כדי שגם בני אחרי יבינו וישיכלו, עכ"ל הזהב.

והעיד נכדו בספר חוט המשולש (עמוד ס"ח), דרעיון זה [הנ"ל] היה מרגלא בפומיה דמורן החתם סופר ז"ע, ולא רק שדרשם פעם אחת וכתבם בספרו, אלא חזר ושינן הדברים.

והיינו מה שכתב בעל חובת הלבבות: "כי הימים מגילות", כלומר, שהם נגללים כמגלת ספר, ולכן ראוי שנכתוב בזאת המגלה כל הקורה עמנו בכל יום, ושוב לאחרית הימים יתבוננו בדברים למפרע, וישתוממו לראות במו העינים איך נגללו המוני פרטים פרטים שונים, אשר בשעתם לא ניכר חשיבותם להזכירם עולמית, ולבסוף רואים כי מגרעין זה עלו וצמחו כגן רטוב דברים טובים ונפלאים עד למאוד.

ידידי היקר רבי זאב נ"ו, הרגשה זאת ישנה, כאשר קוראים מגילת הספר שלך, בה נגללו דברי הימים של קורות ימי חיך, ואות ומופת חותך הוא, למה שאמר נעים זמירות ישראל: "גם כי אלך בגיא צלמות לא אירא רע כי אתה עמדי" (תהלים כ"ג, ד). כי על כל צעד ושעל שלח הקדוש ברוך הוא מלאכים טובים לשמרך בכל דרכיך, ועכשיו כשמסתכלים למפרע רואים השגחתו יתברך שמו הפלא ופלא.

ג

ודע עוד, דעצם דברי החתם סופר זצ"ל, דלכן יש מצוה להתבונן באחרית הימים, בכל מה שעבר עליו מראשיתו ועד אחריתו, "לספרם לבניו אחריו, גם הם יבחנו ויכירו מעשה ה' הגדול אשר יעשה עמהם". לכאורה צריך ביאור, אמאי לא אמר כפשוטו, שלכן יש חיוב לפרסומי ניסא, כדי להודות ולהלל לה' על כל הנסים ונפלאות שעשה עם כותב המגלה. אלא טעמו ונימוקו דעל ידי זה "גם הם - זרעו אחריו - יבחנו ויכירו מעשה ה' הגדול אשר יעשה עמהם".

ובפשטות כל מי שיקרא הספר הזה, יראה דאינם סיפורי מעשיות בעלמא אודות השגחת ה', אלא יראו בעין כיצד התחיל בגנות וסיים בשבח (לכל הפירושים) ל"ע, וממילא כי ישאלך בנך מחר לאמה, מה זאת, שאינו מבין פרטי השגחתו יתברך, אף אתה אמור לו,

התבונן נא בני יקירי בהשתלשלות ימי חיי, גם עלי עבר כוס התרעלה, ועל כל גל וגל נענית ראשי, ואף כי אז בשעת מעשה לא ניכר ולא נראה הטובה הגנוז בגוויה, אך לבסוף בהתבוננות לאחור ותראו מעשי ה' ונפלאותיו, כאמור "אני ראשון ואני אחרון ומבלעדי אין אלקים" (ישעי' מ"ד, ו').

זה שכתב החתם סופה, כי מן המצוה הזאת של כתיבת ספר דברי הימים, ילמדו בניהם אחריהם לקח של חיזוק, וגם הם יבחנו בדרכי ה' ונפלאותיו. ואכן הרגשה זאת צריכה להתעורר לכל מי שיקרא השתלשלות ימי חייו של הרופא ר' זאב נרו יאיר.

ד

וראה עוד דברים נחמדים בדרשות חתם סופר (שבועות דף רפ"ח), וז"ל: נראה לי, כי לא ניתנה התורה ליחידים, כי אם לכללת ישראל, חלבנה בהדי בוסמין דוקא, באופן שיהיה לכל אדם מישראל חלקו בתורה, ואם הוא אינו בא, בא בנו, או בן בנו ממשפחתו, וירש אותה מורשה, כי הניצוץ שבתוכו, אם אינו מבעיר עתה, התלהבות התורה עתיד הוא להבעיר אחר כמה דורות. וזהו: "ואני זאת בריתי וגו' לא ימושו מפיו ומפי זרעך מעתה ועד עולם", שלא יצויר שתהיה כתר התורה ניטל ממשפחה אחת מישראל מעתה ועד עולם ח"ו.

ומשום כן אוכלים מאכלי חלב בשבועות, וסמכוה אקרא (במדבר כ"ח, כ"ו): "בהקריבכם מנחה חדשה לה' בשבועותיכם" ראשי תיבות מחל"ב. כי החלב היא אופן הברירה מהפרה אוכל מפסולת. אמנם אחרי שנחלבה הפרה והוציא החלב ממנה, אזי אם נברור גם החלב בעצמה, תחלק לג' מינים, השומן, והוא החמאה החשוב שבה, והנותר יעשה ממנה חריצים וגבינות, והוא הבינונית, והשלישית, מי החלב שאינו שוה כלום, אמנם בלי ברירה, אלא יניחה כמות שהיא מעורב, הרי שלשתן בצירופם טוב מאוד, והיא משקה חשובה מאוד, והיא מחיה אדם ובהמה בראשית הווייתם.

והכי נמי עם ה' אלו, נבררו מפרות הבשן אומות העולם, כמוציא החלב מדדי הפרה, ואם גם עתה נברור בחלב עצמו, ויהי' בני עלי' בבחינת חמאה, והבינונים בבחינת גבינה, וישארו שארי עמא דארעא ח"ו כמי חלב שאין בהם צורך, ולא ניחא למרייהו למימר הכי, אלא ישארו בתערובתם, ותהי' משקה המחי' כל העולם שוה לכל.

ומשום כן נתנה התורה במעמד הנבחר והנפלא הזה, בתחלת צאתינו מעבודת מצרים ולא

היינו כדאים לזה, להורות, כי אין מעצור ולא יתייבש אדם מחלקו בתורה, אפילו אם יהי בשפל המדרגה, מכל מקום כמוהו כמו הגדול שבגדולים, עכ"ל.

המתבונן בדברות קדשו, יווכח לראות כי רוח הקודש ממש הופיע בבית מדרשו, כי אכן ממש כך הוה. וזאת יראה כל הקורא בספרי דברי הימים, על דבר המגיפה הרוחנית הנוראה שאירע במדינת רוסלאנד רח"ל, על ידי הרשעים המושלים הקאמוניסטן, שלא רק זממו לעקור את הכל, אלא אכן כך עשו, באמצעות רציחה ושפיכת דמים, ובכפיה באופן איום ונורא, אשר תסמרנה שערות ראש, למשמע כל אשר עבר על אחינו בני ישראל בימים ההם. ואף כי רבים וגם שלמים לחמו נגדם במסירות נפש ממש עד זיבולא בתרייתא, אבל במציאות לא יכלו לגדל הדורות בדרך ה' ולתורתו, והרשעים אמרו לכו ונכחידם ונכבה נר התורה רח"ל, ולא נתנו רשות ללמוד תורה כלל, וכך גדלו דורות אשר לא ידעו מעיקרי היהדות, ודבר זה נמשך רק עד ג' דורות ותו לא!! כי זו היא הבטחה מאת ה', לא ימושו מפיק ומפי זרעך ומפי זרע זרעך אמר ה' מעתה ועד עולם, וכמו שכתב החתם סופר זצ"ל: "כי הניצוץ שבתוכו, אם אינו מבעיר עתה, התלהבות התורה עתיד הוא להבעיר אחר כמה דורות, שלא יצוייר שתהיה כתר התורה ניטל ממשפחה אחת מישראל מעתה ועד עולם ח"ו".

ואותה הבערה ללהב יצאה, ורק במבט זה אפשר להבין קורות ימי חייו של הרופא המהולל, ר' זאב נרו יאיר, כי הניצוץ שבתוכו מבעיר לבבות, בראותם יחד שזכה והחזיר עטרה ליושנה, כידוע לכל מכיריו כי הוא דורש ומבקש את ה', ומתגבר על כל מפריעים ומונעים.

וראוי לומר עליו מליצה, ליישב טענת הרמב"ן ז"ל "מה לחסיד בבית הרופא", כלומה, כי כל תושבי קרית יואל יודעים, דכאשר יכנסו לבית הרופא רבי זאב לצרכי רפואה, תמיד ישמעו ממנו רעיון בעניני חסידות, כי גם בעת עסקו בטיפול הרפואי שפתותיו דובבות רעיונות דחסידותא.

ה

ונראה להוסיף עוד מטעמות כל שהיא בדברי החתם סופר הנ"ל, על פי מה שכתב בספר "אמרי נועם" (לחג השבועות אות מ"ב), כי טבע היין כל מה שנתיישן ביותר, הוא טוב יותר, כמו שאמרו חז"ל (מגילה ט"ז ע"ב), יין ישן שדעת זקנים נוחה הימנו. אבל בנערותו הוא יין מגיתו, שאינו ראוי לנסכים כלל. אבל טבע החלב הוא בהיפוך, כי בנערותו כשיוצא מדדי הבהמה, אז

הוא טוב לרפואה וברוכה בטעם, וכשנתיישן נתקלקל, עיי"ש.

דהנה תלי"ת כל אלה שזכו וגדלו על ברכי התורה והיראה בדרך אבותינו ורבותינו זכותם יגן עלינו, ודאי חוב גדול עליהם שלא לשנות אפילו זיז כל דהו מדרכי אבותינו ורבותינו אשר מפיהם אנו חיים, ולקיים "אל תטוש תורת אמך" (משלי א', ח'). אך היהודים היקרים יוצאי מדינת רוסלאנד וכדומה, אין להם ברירה אחרת, אלא מוכרחים לשנות ממה שראו בבית הוריהם כדי להוסיף בתורה ויראת שמים. ולכן הדרך הזה נמשל לחל"ב. וכמו שעשה הרופא הנכבד ר' זאב נ"י, שלקח מקלו ותרמילו ויצא לדרך לבקש את דרך האמת, במצב שלא היה לו לא נזם אחד ולא צמיד אחד, אך הצמאון לשמוע את דבר ה', היה לו.

ומעתה לא נפלאות היא להבין, הרמז לשתיית חל"ב בחג השבועות במאמר הכתוב: "בהקריבכם מנחה חדשה לה' בשבועותיכם" וכו', דהנה בדרשות חתם סופר (לפסח עמוד רע"ט), כתב: "והקרבנתם מנחה חדשה לה'", היינו שנעשה ממש בריה חדשה, כי נפשו מתחדש ממש, והנפש קרויה "מנחה", כדכתיב (ויקרא ב', א'): "ונפש כי תקריב קרבן מנחה", ע"ש. וכתב החתם סופר, דלכן יש לקרב גם החלבנ"ה, כי סוף סוף בא בנו או בן בנו ויבעיר הניצוץ, וזה ברור כי אי אפשר לבן בנו של זה החלבנה, להתנהג בדרך הישן כפי שראה בבית אבותיו¹, ומוכרח להיות בבחינת חל"ב, לחדש ולשנות עד שנעשה בריה חדשה ממש.

האמנם, ברור בלי שום ספק כלל וכלל, שאין זה דרך חדש, אלא החזרת עטרה ליושנה, כי מבלי זכות אבות של הדורות הקודמים, שמסרו נפשם על קדושת השם, לא היתה מציאות לראות מסירות נפש בבחינה כזאת, אלא כדאמרן שבזכות אבותיו בגן עדן העליון, הנאהבים והנעימים בחייהם וגם ובמותם לא נפרדו, בזכות קדושתם זוכים צאצאי צאצאיהם לעשות מהפכה גדולה כזו.

וזה מרומז במאמר הכתוב (שיר השירים ה', א'): "שתיתי ייני עם חלבי", דגם אלו המוכרחים לשנות מדרכי אבותם, שזו היא בחינת חל"ב, אך זאת לדעת דהכא איירי באופן כי חדש מפני ישן תוציאו, דכל זה דייקא הדרך הישן והישה ובזכות אבותם שמסייעתם, וזהו שתיתי ייני (ויין מרמז לדרך הישן), שזה מרמז על אבותם מדורות הקודמים, "עם חלבי", על ידי זה יש כח לשנות ולעשות המהפכה הנוראה בעזרת השם יתברך.

1

1 וראה בדרשות חתם סופר (חלק ב' בדרוש הספד), שכתב: "רשעים" מכונים "חלבנה", עיי"ש. וגם על אלו 1 הזהיר מרן החתם סופר שיש לקרבם, כי סוף סוף בנו או בן בנו יתקרב לה' ולתורתו.

ואסיים מעין הפתיחה, הנה שפתי לא אכלא להכיר טובה בפרטות להאי רופא נכבד ויקר רבי זאב נרו יאיה, כי כבר אמרו חכז"ל מגלגלין זכות על ידי זכאי, והוא הגבר היה השליח מן השמים להעלות בסייעתא דשמיא ארוכה ומרפא הן לבריאות הגוף של אבי אדוני מורי ורבי הגה"צ שליט"א, וגם לרבות לאמי מורתי תליט"א, וכהנה רבים וגם שלמים, שנהנו ממנו בכל השנים כולן שוין לטובה.

וזכות הרבים ודאי מגיני ומצלי, שעוד יזכה רבות בשנים להמשיך בפעלים טובים, בהצלת נפשות ממש, ויעזור השם יתברך שיזכה לגדל דורות ישרים ומבורכים לה' ולתורתו בהרחבת הדעת ונחת דקדושה בבריאות הגוף והנפש, ואשים קנצי למלין בברכת כתיבה וחתימה טובה, ושנת גאולה וישועה בב"א

ידידו המוקירו ומכבדו כערכו

שמעון זאב מייזליש

פה שכונת ברך משה בקרית

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יעקב בערגשטיין

אבדי"ק נעבליץ

בית המדרש - סניף זאב זאב, ישיבה

בעתה"ת

וזרחה לכם יראי שמי שמש עזקה ומרפא בכנפיה, חסיד ותמים זה מעלה ארוכה, רופא אומן יקרא, רוח המקום ורוח הבריות נוחים חימונו, מוכתר בכתר שם טוב, ה"ה ידידי הרב זאב זעלענקא שליט"א

דבר שלח ביעקב מגלת ספר כתוב, זה ספר תולדות כמה ימי הייך מעטריך ועד עתה, קראתי בתשונות לב ומצאתיו ספר יחיד כמיט בטרתי הזכרונות יבדתי הימים, מהו מעדי נמר כוננו תשתלשלות ארבעים עד שבאת לבאן. נתפעלתי מאד בראותי רעבון נפשך רעמאן נשמתך, לא רעב ללחם ולא עמא לביס כי אם לשמוע דבר ה', לחוות בנוגע ה' ודבקר כחילוקו. וביותר נתרשתי בקראי בו כמה התרפקאות רעו עליך לא טלות ולא שקטת, ובכל זאת שמת בסחונך במי שאמר וה' העולם. אשרי הנבר אשר שם ה' מבטחו. ובספרך הדין החוק ימים רשות, כישל וקיסון מליך וברבים פרעות האמין (אבד ר' ר')

ואמר שאלת ממנו לעשות בהם משפט כתי"ב, הנה לכל באי שער עירינו קרית יואל עיר התמרים דבר שפתים אך למחזור, כי שטר חשוב הולך לפניך ותספורסמות אין צריכך ראה. אך במקום שאין מכירין אותך באתי להעיר, ויקם ערות ביעקב כי זה האיש בקי ברפואות הוא, שמו מפארים למאות ולאליפים יעידון ויעודון דאחתתו גברא הדין לרפאות. ורפא ירפא מכאן שניתנה רשות לרפא לרפאות, יום ולילה לא ינוח ולא ישבות כמעשיו הכבירים על המולוס טירתפא ופל הכריאים שלא יהלו, וכל מי שמשכיב לפתחו יודע כטיב לבו וכנוגע הליכותיו. ופי שיש לו תולה בתוך ביתו ה"ו יודע ומכיר טבעו בחיותו פינה ודואג בערו להמיטא לו מוגר והרופא, ונתןן משט ענה ותושיה מאשר חננו ה' ברובת ביתו בדרבי הרפואה, הונה בעמק רפאים ומרפא לנפש אדם.

ועתה ידידי קח נא את ברכתי, לשנת טובה ותחתך בספרך של צדיקים לאלתר לחיים טובים, ואמיום בברכת השלום, שלום וה' לך, שלום לחוק ולקירוב אמר ה' ורפאתו ועל סמךך ל'ט' ובברכת השנים שתזכה עוד רבות בשנים לתשיך ולהרבות כמעשיך הטובים בכריות גופא ונחורא מעליא לאורך ימים ושנות חיים, עד שזכתי ליעוד חננוא (אבד ר' ר') ארפא פשוטתם אהבם נדבה בב"א

יום א' לסדר זבאו עליך כל הברכות האלה (השיגור והבא) תעשה"ח לפ"ק

יעקב בערגשטיין

שלחי דקייטא תשע"ח לטי"ק

הנני בזה על אודות האי גברא יקרא ר' זאב זאלענקא הי"ו, אשר אני מכירו כבר רבות בשנים כאיש יקר וירא שמים, המתנהג והולך בדרך התורה והמצות, רופא נאמן ומסור בלב ונפש לכל הפונים אליו, לבו פתוח כפתחו של אולם להיות לעזר לחולי ישראל בכל יכלתו, וגם אני נהנה ממנו ומעבודתו הרבה שנים אשר כולם שוים לטובה בהתמסרות ומסירות.

והנה עתה עומד להוציא לאור ספר קורות חייו אשר הרבה הרפתקאות עדו עליו, ואיך התקרב לעבודתו יתברך שמו, ואיזהו חכם הלומד מכל אדם, לכן אמינא לפעלא טבא איישר.

ואסיים בברכה אשר מלאך רפאל ילך עמו, ושתשרה שכינה במעשי ידיו, ויזכה להיות שליח נאמן לרפואת חולי ישראל, עדי נזכה שיתרפאו כל החולים בביאת המשיח, בב"א.

וע"ז באתי על החתום

Yechel Steinhilber

מוצאי שבת פרשת בראשית לסדר "מצא חן בעיני ה'" שנת תשע"ט לפ"ק

I have reviewed the book *Metamorphosis* written by Dr. Vladimir (Zev) Zelenko נ"ו. It's wonderful, and it will inspire and be *mechazek* (give strength to) the reader.

Dr. Zelenko נ"ו is a tremendous individual who has been the personal physician for me and for the Rebbe שליט"א for many years. He is both an incredible doctor and a tremendous *mentch*. His work for the community—whether it be volunteering for Hatzolah or being available at all times of day or night to care for every *Yid*—is truly amazing. He cares for every single *Yid* as if they were the most important person in the world. He is a man who gives his heart and soul for the benefit of the *klal* every single solitary day.

I enjoyed reading the work and biography of Dr. Zelenko נ"ו. This book gives the reader a tremendous feeling of *emunah* and *bitachon*. I highly recommend it.

I wish Dr. Zelenko נ"ו continued success in every one of his undertakings. May *HKB"H* repay his kindness and devotion in kind.

Rebbetzin Soshe Teitelbaum,
Satmar Rebbetzin
October 2018

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my beloved family. Foremost is my wife, Rinat, who has supported me through the most difficult period of my life; my beautiful and precious children: Levi Yitzchok, Esther Tova, Eta Devorah, Nochum Dovid, Shmuel Nosson Yaakov, Menachem Mendel, and Shira; my parents, Alex (Aaron) and Larisa (Leah); my brother (Ephraim) and his wife (Chany); my close friends: Reb Moshe Aron Steinberg, Yoel Wagschal, Reb Levi Appel, Rabbi David Shmuel Greenstein, Ari Felberman, and Reb Yitzchok Markowitz. Finally, I want to dedicate this book in the memory of Rabbi Shneur Zalman HaLevi Shagalov and Rabbi Fivel Weiss.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I want to thank G-d for my existence and the constant blessings that He bestows on me. I would also like to express my deep appreciation to G-d's messengers who have guided my soul along its turbulent journey: Rabbi Heschel Greenberg, Rabbi Schneur Zalman Gafne, Rabbi Yaakov Goldberg, Rabbi Yosef Wirtemberg, Rabbi Shneur Zalman HaLevi Shagalov (o.b.m.), Reb Moshe Aron Steinberg, Rabbi Pinches Hersh Reich, Rabbi Berish Kaufman, Rabbi Daniel Schonbuch, and Rabbi Fivel Weiss (o.b.m.).¹

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1 o.b.m.: of blessed memory.

Yitzchok Jacobson for reading the book and providing me with valuable feedback.

Special thanks to Rabbi Jacob Bergstein for his spiritual guidance. His advice helped me write about sensitive issues in an appropriate halachic framework.

FOREWORD

18 Elul, 5778—August 29, 2018

Although I was honored by Dr. Zev Zelenko's request that I write the foreword to his autobiography, *Metamorphosis*, I quickly realized that it is no small task to summarize the illustrious accomplishments of this multifaceted human being.

However, the title of this book, *Metamorphosis*, reminded me of a conversation with my primary care physician Dr. Zelenko, during my first medical visit with him over a decade ago, which inspired this essay.

Zev was testing my cognitive abilities and asked me an unusual question, "What does an agnostic, dyslexic insomniac do all night long?" I responded; "How would I know? I am not one of them." Zev answered, "He lays awake wondering if there is a dog."

When I finally got it, we shared a brief laugh. Zev then asked me which of the three conditions, in my opinion, was the most difficult to treat. I did not know the answer, so Zev explained that many treatments exist for insomnia and dyslexia, but the only treatment for an agnostic is to find G-o-d! Without G-d, a person's world is literally backward and is no different than the life of a d-o-g. However, with G-d in a person's life he can live

straight and sleep peacefully. He went on to say, “Finding G-d is a lifelong quest and is the actual purpose of our existence.”

His words resonated with me, especially considering the Russian “agnostic” indoctrination that Zev was raised in. Yet he found G-d on his own.”

This brief conversation provided me with a fascinating glimpse into Zev’s essence—his ability to masterfully blend deep spirituality with modern medicine. I recalled the tale of an elderly woman boasting about her two sons, a doctor and a rabbi, saying; my sons are the greatest: one makes me well for “nothing” and the other makes me good for “nothing”. Zev is that doctor and that rabbi rolled in one. That is why his unique “body-soul” health-brand is so very effective.

A friend, who is also one of Zev’s patients, recently told me, “An ingrown toenail, which prevented me from walking, brought me to Doctor Zelenko. But I left with a spiritual awakening that made me feel alive. I literally floated out of his office.” I echo this sentiment.

Having read *Metamorphosis*, I was awed by Zev’s quantum spiritual growth despite lacking even the most fundamental religious building blocks. Rising above all obstacles, Zev excelled to become a great, famous physician and role model.

While this is true about Zev’s past, it is all-the-more true at the writing of this foreword, as Zev is overcoming yet another obstacle of a serious health situation. I am amazed at how

Zev literally shoves his pain, discomfort, and stress aside and continues to rebuild broken bodies and spirits.

Readers of *Metamorphosis* will be inspired to emulate Zev's can-do approach to life with a spirit of hope and renewal.

From the deepest recesses of my soul, I pray for you, Zev Ben Leah, for a full and speedy recovery. May you continue Hashem's mission in health, joy, and peace.

With love and admiration,

Ari Felberman

Monsey, N.Y.

{1}

LEAVING RUSSIA

Throughout history, there have been movements that have attempted to deny G-d's existence. One recent example is the former Soviet Union. To consolidate political power, the few of the ruling class instituted policies that made "THE STATE" of prime importance. Individual freedoms as well as religious observance were viewed as a direct threat to the "almighty" state. Belief in G-d weakened the grip of the tyrannical state by giving people hope and faith for redemption.

For millions of Jews throughout the majority of the twentieth century, the Soviet system was a spiritual hellhole. The Soviet machine chewed up and destroyed lives for the greater good of the state. Jewish observance was illegal and countless Jews were persecuted, imprisoned, and executed.

I was born in 1973 into this perverse society. My young Jewish parents, Alex (Aaron) and Larisa (Leah), had been educated in the Soviet system and religious life was foreign to them. They only vaguely remembered their grandparents' keeping any Jewish rituals and traditions. My father remembers seeing matzos on Passover at his grandparents house. My

mother remembers her grandparents koshering meat and lighting Chanukah candles. Her paternal grandfather used to pray with a *minyan*¹ every day. The *minyan* was never held at the same place twice, to avoid detection by the authorities. These vague memories serve as a painful reminder of an interruption of two thousand years of connection between G-d and His people.

My four grandparents all came from religious Orthodox Jewish families and were the first generation to fall victim to Soviet G-dlessness. Stalin's murderous regime attempted to snuff out all Jewish observance. They closed Jewish elementary schools, *yeshivot*,² *mikvaot*,³ and synagogues. In addition, the NKVD⁴ would spy on, harass, and arrest Jews for trying to maintain their faith. In 1927, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok



Me: Kiev, 1974



**My father and me:
Kiev, 1974**

1 *minyan*: The quorum of ten Jewish males (in Orthodox tradition) needed to perform certain communal prayers or rites.

2 *yeshivah* (pl.: *yeshivot*): Jewish schools for study of the Torah and Talmud.

3 *mikveh* (pl.: *mikvaot*): Bathing pool or body of water that fulfills biblical specifications, used for spiritual purification.

4 NKVD: The USSR's police and secret police agency, precursors of the KGB.

Schneersohn (the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe), was arrested and imprisoned in the Bolshoi Dom (“Big House”) Prison in Leningrad.⁵



Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn, Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe

The Yevseksiya, which was the Jewish affairs section of the NKVD, run by Jews, was responsible for his arrest. He was accused of counterrevolutionary activities and sentenced to death. During one of his interrogations by an atheistic Communist Jew, a gun was taken out and pointed at the Rebbe’s head. The interrogator said, “This toy has made many people talk.” The Rebbe answered calmly, “Perhaps someone who has one world and many gods, but for a person who has two worlds and one G-d, it does not work.” After incredible international pressure, the Rebbe’s sentence was miraculously commuted and he was released. Shortly afterward, he left Russia.

World War II was another event that destabilized Jewish observance. Many Jewish communities were murdered and completely wiped off the map by the Nazis. Large numbers of Jewish families were uprooted and separated from each other, never to be reunited again. The remaining underground Jewish infrastructure was further disrupted. An untold number of Jewish soldiers were

⁵ Under most of the Soviet regime, the city of St. Petersburg was called Leningrad.



Yitzchok, my paternal grandfather



My grandfather and father



drafted and killed at the front. All these terrible events made Jewish observance nearly impossible.

My paternal grandfather, Yitzchok, was the youngest of eleven children. He was a soldier during World War II. His job was to build pontoon bridges so that tanks and soldiers could cross rivers.

I remember his stories about being bombed and shot at by German planes while he was in the water, building bridges. After the war, he returned to Kiev and married my grandmother. His only two brothers were killed at the front.

My paternal grandmother, Ida, was one of two children. As the Nazis approached Kiev in September 1941, many people started to escape. Her family consisted of her parents, a brother, and her maternal grandmother. Her father, Wolf, was drafted and killed during the war. I was named after him (Zev Wolf). My great-grandmother refused to leave her sick, elderly mother. My grandmother's brother also refused to leave his mother. As a



Babi Yar, September 1941

result, only my grandmother was evacuated from Kiev to Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Whoever remained in Kiev was murdered by the Nazis at Babi Yar, a ravine on the outskirts of Kiev, where the Nazis shot or

buried alive more than one hundred thousand Jews.

My maternal grandmother, Esther, was one of two children. Her father, Yehuda, was drafted into the Russian army and he survived the war. My grandmother; her sister, Devorah; and her mother, Riva, were evacuated from Kiev to Fergana, Uzbekistan. Yehuda's parents were Falik and Hisya Kanievsky from Malyn, Ukraine. They were deeply religious people. Falik died in Uzbekistan in 1943. Malyn was a town next to Zhitomir and a center for the Chernobyl Chassidic dynasty. Those who survived were reunited in Kiev after the war.

My maternal grandfather, Shmuel Nossou, was drafted into the Russian army. During World War II, his army division was surrounded and cut off



Falik Kanievsky
My great-great-grandfather



Street in prerevolutionary
Malyn, Ukraine



Shmuel Nosson, my maternal grandfather

from the main army. He was trapped in occupied Nazi territory. He joined the partisans and was involved in guerilla warfare and sabotage against the Nazis. He was eventually reunited

with the main Russian army and survived. His family was from a town called Romanov, Ukraine. They were evacuated to somewhere in Uzbekistan. He had a younger brother, Lev, who was killed at the front. My grandfather was reunited with his parents in Kiev after the war.

While growing up, my parents experienced anti-Semitism. For example, my mother was told not to even try to apply to Kiev University because she was Jewish. She had to move to Leningrad to go to school. My father was called *Zhid*, a derogatory term used for Jew, throughout his childhood and schooling. He broke a few people's noses in defense of being Jewish. He told me once that he did not know what it meant to be a Jew, but he could not tolerate anti-Jewish sentiment. I used to attend day care. One time, my grandmother came to pick me up and overheard the caretakers calling me "that little *Zhid*."

My father grew increasingly disillusioned with life in the Soviet Union and decided to move to America. Initially, my mother was against the idea of moving because she did not want to leave her

family behind, but eventually she consented. In 1977, when I was three years old, my parents and I left the Soviet Union.

We left Kiev by train. My entire extended family was at the train station to say goodbye. My grandparents were not interested in leaving Russia in their old age. My mother told me that she thought it would be the last time in her life that she would see her parents.

As the train pulled away from the station, I waved to everyone while crying. My grandfather, Shmuel Nosson, looked at his wife and then at me, and suddenly said, “We are moving to America.” He then explained, “He cannot live without being close to me.”

In 1979, my four grandparents left Russia and moved to New York. They settled in the same apartment building that we were living in. In 1980, the immigration window closed, and the rest of my extended family members were unable to leave. They remained stranded in Russia until 1991, when the Soviet Union began to fall apart.

{2}

COMING TO AMERICA

We left Kiev and arrived in Vienna, Austria. After staying there for ten days, we were given permission to take a train to Rome, Italy. We lived in Rome awaiting permission to come to America.

After three months, we received visas, immigrated to New York, and settled in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. My parents came to this new country in pursuit of a better life. What did a better life mean for a young immigrant family from the USSR in 1978? For the typical immigrant, it meant the pursuit of materialism and the avoidance of anti-Semitism.

A few months after arriving in U.S., my father took me to an organization called F.R.E.E (Friends of Refugees of Eastern Europe) in Crown Heights, and they organized my circumcision. I remember my circumcision. I recently asked my father why he did it. He told me that when he was eight days old his grandfather had him circumcised.



Rome, 1978

My father became a taxi driver in New York City, my mother worked in a fur coat factory, and I was enrolled in public school. One time when my father was working in Manhattan, he was pulled over by the police. When the officer came over, my father offered him twenty dollars. The officer laughed and said, “This is not the old country; please don’t bribe the police here.” He let him go with only a warning. Throughout my childhood, my father worked sixteen-hour days driving his taxi. It was grueling work and I was impressed by his work ethic.



Brooklyn, 1978

While working in the fur factory, my mother took computer programming courses. When she graduated, she got a job at The Home Insurance Company and worked there for over ten years until the company closed. Afterward, she found a good job working for Morgan Stanley. She worked there for many years until she got sick. During my childhood, my mother was a real superwoman who was able to balance her work life with her family responsibilities. I owe my parents a great debt of gratitude. They taught me that a person could only succeed through consistent hard work. I learned from an early age that I would need to combine raw intelligence with steadfastness. Only then would I get myself out of the “ghetto.”

When I was seven years old, my brother Frank (Ephraim) was born. He had his *bris*⁶ on the eighth day after his birth, as is customary in most countries where all are free to practice their religion. As I will explain later, Ephraim was inherently spiritual and connected to G-d from the very beginning of his life. As my spiritual journey evolved, Ephraim was always surprisingly supportive of me. He believed in G-d, the soul, and spirituality many years before I even started to think about it.

⁶ *bris* (pl.: *brisim*), short for *brit milah* (lit., “covenant of circumcision”): The Torah custom (Genesis 17:10–14) of circumcising Jewish males, usually on the eighth day after birth. For most Jewish Soviet émigrés, it was only upon leaving the USSR that they were finally free to undergo *brit milah* and adopt other religious practices.



SCHOOL

America was in the height of the Cold War, and being a Russian immigrant in the early 1980s made me very unpopular in school. I was bullied by other kids for being a “Russian” and soon became withdrawn and socially awkward. I was called many derogatory names and occasionally even physically pushed around. But I found comfort in my schoolwork. By the time I graduated sixth grade I was at the top of the class and was asked to be the valedictorian.

My teenage years were turbulent, and I had trouble fitting in with other kids. I always did well in school with minimal effort. However, socially, I had few friends and was very lonely. When I was thirteen years old, I got a job as a stock boy at a local



Me and my brother

high-end and very expensive clothing store. I enjoyed working and making my own money. Money was power. I would spend all my money on expensive clothes and other materialistic objects to try to feel better about myself. I foolishly thought that materialism was the cure for my low self-esteem and social awkwardness. Over

the years, I learned that materialism was only a temporary Band-Aid for my emotional pain and it was never enough. I easily became bored with “things” and always wanted more and more.

As I grew older, I gravitated toward atheism and lived a typical secular lifestyle. By the time I went to college at Hofstra University in 1991, I was a self-proclaimed atheist. I enjoyed debating with people and proving to them that G-d did not exist. I studied philosophy and was drawn to nihilistic thinkers such as Sartre and Nietzsche. I adhered to their dictum that “Hell is other people,” and “Conflict is the essence of all human relationships.” This way of thinking appealed to my experience and worldview. To me, people were an obstacle blocking my path to success, so I used and objectified even those close to me. In other words, since I did not have the belief that people have a Divine spark, I had no problem treating them as animalistic adversaries. It was survival of the fittest.

I was lonely and depressed. I knew I was Jewish, American, and Russian but I truly lacked any sense of identity and sense of belonging. Being Jewish meant nothing to me, and I would have intermarried if the opportunity had presented itself.

While at Hofstra, I also studied chemistry and premedical sciences. I graduated summa cum laude with high honors in



High School
Graduation
May 1991,
Brooklyn, N.Y.

chemistry and a 3.99 GPA. I was at the top of the university and received multiple academic awards. While in my third year of college, I was accepted early into the State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo School of Medicine, with a scholarship. Other students admired and envied me, but I felt stupid, ugly, and lonely. I was accomplished and highly respected. Yet I was unhappy and empty. Something was seriously wrong, but I did not know what it was.



Hofstra University
Graduation, May 1995

FIRST TIME IN ISRAEL

Several weeks before college graduation, my roommate informed me about a free trip to Israel for Jewish students on campus, organized by the Jewish college student organization Hillel International. Seeking something interesting to do for that last summer prior to beginning my medical studies, I signed up for the trip. I was twenty-one years old when I traveled to Israel for the first time. The purpose of my trip was to have fun and had nothing to do with spiritual self-discovery. Our guide was Rabbi Moshe Shur from Queens College Hillel (Queens, New York). Our trip exposed me to the full spectrum of Jewish life in Israel, from secular to religious. For some unknown reason, Rabbi Shur took a special interest in me and invited me to spend Shabbos⁷ with his friends in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Shabbos was an unfamiliar experience for me. I was clearly out of my element



Rabbi Moshe Shur
July 1995

⁷ Shabbos: Yiddish form of “Shabbat,” the Jewish Sabbath.

and confused about what was happening. The religious rituals, the blessings, and the routine seemed bizarre and weird to me. I did not know what to do or say and was very uncomfortable. However, I did notice something very beautiful happening at the table. Everyone seemed relaxed and happy. The clothing was formal and beautiful. The smell and taste of the food were amazing. The family structure and order were perfect. The children seemed at ease and had a clear and vital role in the experience. The father asked them questions about their weekly studies. The songs were emotional and deeply penetrating. The ambience and overall emotional experience radiated tranquility and peace. Shabbos touched me deeply.

One week later was the Jewish holiday of Shavuot. Rabbi Shur took me to the Western Wall. Thousands of Jews were wearing their prayer shawls and were in deep and fervent prayer. I was in the middle of this mass of humanity and I felt absolutely nothing. I did not understand what the purpose of prayer was. I had become accustomed to rationality and only believed in things that my finite mind could comprehend and see. I was perturbed and intrigued simultaneously by what was going on. As a scientist, I had a strong will to understand everything. I wanted to understand what these people were doing and experiencing.

The next few weeks were spent traveling around the beautiful Land of Israel. I fell in love with the land. We traveled to Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias, Tzfat, the Golan Heights, the Dead Sea, Masada, Ein Gedi, Akko, and other sites. The Land of Israel seemed to exist

on a completely different plane of reality. As the tour unfolded, every experience was progressively more vivid, colorful, and deeply emotionally penetrating. The place that touched me the most was the city of Tzfat. There was something unique in the air. My senses were stimulated in a way that was completely new to me. I felt alive.



Rabbi David Aaron
Dean of Isralight,
Jerusalem 1995

After three weeks my trip was ending, and it was time to go back home. I could not leave. Something awoke in me and was pulling at my inner core. It was suprarational and not something I clearly understood. However, it did not matter. I could not leave. I spoke to Rabbi Shur about my feelings and he seemed to understand the psychodynamics at play. He got me enrolled in a program called Isralight, run by Rabbi David Aaron in the old city of Jerusalem. This institution was my first exposure to formal Jewish learning and knowledge.

As a side note, I had to call my parents and let them know of my change of plans. I called my mother in New York and told her that I was not coming home with the Hillel group. She was surprised and concerned. I also spoke to my younger brother, who was fourteen years old at that time, and I told him, “I think I’ve discovered G-d.” He told to me that he had been “praying for me that this should happen.”

I studied at Isralight for another month while living in the Old City. I was exposed to Jewish law, Talmudic learning, and Chassidic and mystical teachings. It was truly remarkable and difficult to accurately describe the vibrations that I felt in my soul. Jewish learning was completely different from secular learning. Jewish learning penetrates the mind and heart and inspires the soul.



Dr. Gerald Schroeder,
Jerusalem 1995

In addition to learning, I became more experienced with authentic Jewish life. During this time, I had the privilege of meeting Dr. Gerald Schroeder, a deeply observant Jew and world-famous physicist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Dr. Schroeder is the author of several bestselling books, including *Genesis and the Big Bang: The Discovery of Harmony between Modern Science and the Bible*.

He helped me resolve my perceived contradictions between Torah ideas and current scientific knowledge by intellectually eviscerating me. He showed me that my understanding of science and the Torah was so elementary that it was the epitome of arrogance to deny faith based on my superficial understanding. After talking to him, I ran out of questions that contradicted faith. He challenged me to continue delving into the depths of physics and metaphysics. Only then would I discover the truth.

As my time at Isralight was ending, I spoke to Rabbi Aaron about continuing my Jewish education. I mentioned to him that I was moving to Buffalo to start medical school and that I was worried since I did not know anyone there to learn the Torah with. He told me that he was lecturing to a group of students and their rabbi from Buffalo *that very day* in the old city, and I should come along to meet them. I met Rabbi Nosson Gurary, an emissary of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Rabbi Gurary became my first Jewish contact in Buffalo, New York.

BACK TO NEW YORK

Leaving the Land of Israel to come back to New York was exceedingly difficult. I had to leave the place in which I had started to feel emotionally alive. I was not yet committed to a Torah way of life and my Jewish knowledge and experience was very basic. I did start wearing a yarmulke. My parents were not sure of what to make of my new spiritual interests and what it would mean for my future career and interpersonal relationships. From their perspective, I was an accomplished secular young man with an outstanding future. They were unaware of my spiritual emptiness as well as my poor self-esteem and emotional pain. My brother was supportive and seemed to intuitively understand what I was going through, perhaps better than I understood it myself.

Very soon, after I returned home, my mother and I were walking on Avenue U in Brooklyn. My mother decided to get takeout Chinese food for dinner from our favorite family restaurant. I was not yet keeping kosher. After the order was completed the Chinese waiter brought out the food and told us “I removed the pork” while pointing to my yarmulke. The

embarrassment and shame that I felt at that moment was a powerful catalyst to continue my spiritual growth.

A few days later, I experienced some car trouble and had to go to the mechanic. A Russian Jew that my family had known for many years owned this repair shop. When he saw me wearing my yarmulke he became very irritated. He asked me, “What the hell happened to you?” I innocently said that I was exploring my roots and discovering G-d. He became overtly hostile, reached into his pocket, took out a stack of hundred-dollar bills, and yelled at me, “*This is my ‘g-d.’*”

My new interests in Judaism were causing vibrations and ripples, everywhere I went. Everyone seemed to have an opinion of what I was doing, mostly in opposition and some in support. However, no one was neutral or indifferent. It was confusing to find out that it mattered to other people what I believe or do not believe in, and what I wear or do not wear. I even had to tell someone close to me, “Don’t make me choose between you and G-d because you will lose.” The situation became very uncomfortable, and I was glad to move to Buffalo and escape the constant scrutiny.

SHUFFLE OFF TO BUFFALO

I moved to Buffalo, New York in August 1995 to start medical school. I had long hair, and wore ripped jeans and a big yarmulke. Medical school was difficult. The volume of information that had to be learned daily was overwhelming. In the first year of school, we had to take a course called Gross Anatomy. In this course, we dissected a dead human body. The body assigned to me was a 70-year-old man who had died from lung cancer. Before every dissection, the anatomy professor would lecture to us and demonstrate how to perform the required procedure. One day, I walked into the lecture hall and saw human heads on the table. The professor proceeded to demonstrate what needed to be done. Afterward, I returned to the body assigned to me and performed the required dissection. For the next week, I walked around the anatomy lab with half of someone's face in my hands.

This macabre experience made me become obsessed with fundamental questions of the human condition. What separates me from this piece of meat in my hands? What keeps me in dynamic equilibrium and homeostasis? What

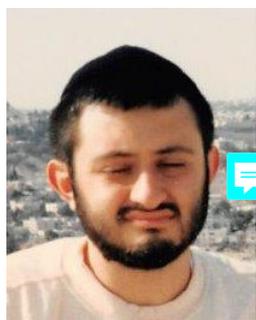
happens after death? What does it mean to be Jewish? Is there a universal code of right and wrong? If G-d exists, what does He want from me?

I reached out to Rabbi Gurary, the Chabad rabbi I had met in Jerusalem, and started to occasionally visit his synagogue. I still struggled with faith in G-d and the belief that He cares about the details of what I do. I still did not observe the laws of Shabbos and *kashrus*.⁸

On January 6, 1996, there was a historic blizzard in the Northeast with over four feet of snow blanketing the area. I called my father in Brooklyn to say hello. He picked up the phone and did not sound right. I asked him what was wrong. He told me that he was shoveling snow off his car and had started to feel sick. He had just come home, he heard the phone ring, and it was me. I asked him what he was feeling. He said that he had chest pain and trouble breathing. I said to him that he may be having a heart attack and he should call an ambulance. He put the phone down and called 911. A few minutes later, I called him back. He was feeling worse, getting more anxious and afraid. I asked him to say *Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad*. Translated, this means, “Hear O Israel, G-d is our G-d; He is One.” This is the fundamental proclamation of Jewish faith in G-d’s unity and, at the time, it was the only prayer that

⁸ *kashrus*: The biblical dietary laws of “keeping kosher,” which include not eating shellfish and pork, and not eating dairy and meat/poultry at the same meal.

I knew by heart. My father repeated it, word for word. To my knowledge, that was the first time my father prayed. The ambulance arrived within five minutes of his call, and he was taken to Coney Island Hospital. As he was being wheeled into the emergency room, his heart went into ventricular fibrillation and he clinically died. However, since he was in the emergency room, the doctor was able to shock his heart and give him the appropriate medications. His heart started to beat normally again, and he was revived. My father had experienced a serious heart attack and he was transferred to the cardiac care unit.



Yeshiva Ohr
Somayach, Summer
1996

While this was all happening, I was in Buffalo, completely unaware of his condition. I could not reach any relatives for an update and felt helpless. This was the first time in my life that I sincerely and heartfully prayed to G-d. I was four hundred miles away and could do nothing except beg the Creator that my father should live.

After a few days, my father was discharged from the hospital in stable condition and told to follow up with an interventional cardiologist at New York University Medical Center. My father had a cardiac catheterization the following week, and the results showed that he would need to have open-heart surgery to repair the blocked arteries. He came home and began to

prepare for what needed to be done. The next day, the doctor called him and said that there had been a mistake and a mix-up with the results. He did not need surgery but required only medicine to control his condition.

Within a few weeks of my father's heart attack, my parents put up *mezuzot*⁹ in their apartment. I asked my father what he remembered of his death experience and he said that he saw nothing. It seems to me that G-d got my father's attention and he had become motivated to grow.

I was deeply affected by what had happened to my father. I felt that G-d had answered my prayers. My father's heart attack solidified my faith in G-d and my desire to live according to Jewish law. I began to attend synagogue daily, wore *tzitzit*,¹⁰ bought *tefillin*,¹¹ and started to keep kosher and Shabbos. Around this time, I had the good fortune of meeting Rabbi Heschel Greenberg. Rabbi Greenberg, a Lubavitcher

9 *mezuzah* (pl.: *mezuzot*): Small, rolled parchment scrolls inscribed with passages from the Torah—including the Shema prayer said by my father at the time of his heart attack—that Jews affix in a protective cover to the doorposts of their homes in accordance with biblical instructions (Deuteronomy 6:9, 11:20).

10 *tzitzit*: string fringes attached to certain corners of garments worn by Jewish men and boys, in fulfillment of biblical commandments (Deuteronomy 22:12 and Numbers 15:37–41).

11 *tefillin* (“Phylacteries”—English word derived from the Greek word for “amulets”): black leather, cube-shaped vessels containing parchment scrolls with biblical passages (Exodus 12:1–10 and 13:11–16, and Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and 11:13–21), strapped onto the head, arm, and hand of Jewish men as part of morning prayers on weekdays, in accordance with Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18, and Exodus 13:9 and 13:16.

*shliach*¹² in Buffalo, became one of the most influential people in my life. Rabbi Greenberg and his wife opened their home, family, and hearts to me. They fed my body and soul. I spent almost every Shabbos and Yom Tov¹³ at their house and started to learn and internalize the nuances of Jewish observance. Rabbi Greenberg exposed me to the deepest



Rabbi Heschel
Greenberg
Shliach in Buffalo, N.Y.

Chassidic teachings. He also told me that he feels that I have a grandfather somewhere in heaven looking after me. I felt my soul flowing through me for the first time, and prayer became an integral part of my daily routine. Something extremely powerful had been unleashed within me and it was all-encompassing. For the first time in my life, I truly believed in G-d and wanted to live according to His will.

At around this time, my mother called me, and she was very upset. My brother had stopped eating in the house and was smuggling kosher food into his room. She found wrappers and other evidence of my brother's "contraband." My mother told me that I had to fix this so that my brother could eat in the house. I called an organization called Go Kosher and a

12 *Shliach* (pl.: *shluchim*): Among Chassidic Jews in the Chabad-Lubavitch tradition, a *shliach* is an emissary or agent of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, assigned to encourage, educate, and uplift Jews in the locality to which they have been sent.

13 Yom Tov: Any holiday period on the Jewish calendar.

nice elderly religious couple from Crown Heights came to my parents' home to teach them about the laws of *kashrus*. When they were ready, my parents obtained new pots, cutlery, and kitchen utensils. Then the blowtorch crew came to the house and transformed their oven and stove, and the rest of their kitchen, to a kosher one.

My brother was in public high school at that time. He and I pressured my parents and they agreed to allow him to enroll in a Jewish school. My brother transferred to Torah Academy of Brooklyn. My brother found Jewish observance intuitively natural. He is now married, fully observant, and a Jewish scholar.

At this time I was in my second semester of the first year of medical school. School was going well, and summer break was approaching. I was spending a lot of time at the Greenberg home and my Jewish knowledge was expanding. I knew that I wanted to live an observant Jewish life but was not yet sure where in the Jewish world I fit in. Most of my exposure was through Chabad-Lubavitch. While I loved what I was learning and experiencing, I was aware of other approaches in *Yiddishkeit*.¹⁴ I spoke to Rabbi Greenberg and he encouraged me to explore other options. I found out about a program called Jewish Learning Experience at a *yeshivah* called Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem. At this point, I cut off my long hair and started to dress in a more mature way: no more ripped jeans.

¹⁴ *Yiddishkeit* (literally, "Jewishness"): The traditional Jewish lifestyle and experience.



 In the summer of 1996, I returned to Jerusalem and studied for two months at Ohr Somayach. I enjoyed the *yeshivah's* emphasis on Talmudic studies and Jewish law. However, I missed the Chassidic and mystical learning that I had become accustomed to with Rabbi Greenberg. My experience in Ohr Somayach solidified my desire to become a Lubavitcher 

MEDICAL SCHOOL

(Chabad) Chassid.

After the summer, I returned to Buffalo to start my second year of medical school. At this point, I was fully committed to living an observant life and felt at home with Chabad-Lubavitch.

In the first year of medical school, we learned about the normal structure and function of the human body. In the second year, the emphasis was on disease and dysfunction. There is a well-known syndrome called “the second-year medical student disease.” Almost every student during this year thinks that something is seriously wrong with them. I was no exception. One day, I had chest pain, and I was convinced that I was having a heart attack. I drove myself to the emergency room. All tests were normal,



December 1996
Second year of
medical school

and it was gas.

As I became more observant, some new challenges presented themselves. I found it difficult to focus on the task before me. When I was in school, my mind would wander and pull me toward learning Torah. When I was learning Torah, my thoughts would tell me I should be studying medicine. As a result, my progress in both disciplines suffered. The situation required a good amount of effort to correct. I had to hyper-focus my mind on the task before me. When I was learning Torah, I was only learning Torah. When I was studying medicine, I was only studying medicine. I found that by compartmentalizing my spiritual and academic pursuits I began to thrive in both disciplines. I found this skill very useful in many other aspects of my life in the future.

As my second year of medical school was ending, I decided to take a leave of absence for one year. I understood that to successfully run a Jewish home and family in the future, I needed to fully immerse myself in Torah learning. I needed to learn how to learn. Up to this point in my spiritual development, I was essentially dependent on others to teach me. I knew that Torah learning is a lifelong endeavor and that I needed to acquire the skill set to learn independently. I was accepted to Yeshivah Ohr Tmimim in Kfar Chabad, Israel.

KFAR CHABAD

I arrived at Yeshivah Ohr Tmimim in the summer of 1997. The *yeshivah* was in a small village and was isolated from the rest of the world. It was the perfect place to disconnect and seclude oneself from the mundane world and connect to Divinity. The intensity of study made medical school seem like kindergarten. The daily schedule was from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. Besides the technical learning and prayer, the *yeshivah* had weekly *farbrengens*.¹⁵ They were frequently led by Rabbi Schneur Zalman Gafne. Rabbi Gafne is one of the most remarkable people I have ever met. He became and is still my mentor. His talks would elevate the soul of all who listened to them. His ability to reveal the essence of the Jewish soul was truly supernatural. One time I witnessed a Jewish college student, who was traveling through Israel, attending one of Rabbi Gafne's talks. The very next week he had cut off his ponytail and was a student in the *yeshivah*. This happened very frequently. The *yeshivah* had a remarkable effect on its stu-

¹⁵ *farbrengen*: Chassidic gathering.

dents and visitors. It was a factory for the revelation and cleansing of Jewish souls.

On Friday afternoons, the *yeshivah* students were expected to leave Kfar Chabad and go out into the world to meet Jews. The idea was to provide an opportunity for our fellow brothers to put on *tefillin*. I was always amazed to see the effect that

putting on *tefillin* had on people. I learned that the soul transcends time. A person may have neglected their soul's needs for decades, but given the opportunity, the soul would reveal itself. I witnessed many people have intense cathartic experiences while putting on *tefillin* and saying the Shema prayer. One time I put *tefillin* on a man in his seventies. He told me that the last time he put on *tefillin* was at his bar mitzvah. While putting them on, he began to tremble and cry. He said to me that at that moment he had just remembered his father, grandfather, and G-d.



Rabbi Gafne's *farbrengen*, Yeshivah Ohr Tmimim, Kfar Chabad, Israel 1997



Rabbi Gafne's *farbrengen*
My brother (far right), Me (to left of him)
Kfar Chabad, Israel 1997

On another occasion, I went to a hospital near Kfar Chabad called Assaf HaRofeh. I went into a patient's room and met his son who was visiting. The patient was sleeping, I thought, so I asked the son if he would like to put on *tefillin*. He agreed, and I helped him with it. As he was putting on *tefillin*, the patient started to move and open his eyes. I simply thought that our noise had awoken him. However, that was not the case; the patient had been in a coma for several days. As his son was putting on *tefillin*, he began to awaken. The doctors and nurses flooded the room and I had to leave. I am not sure of what happened next.



Me and my brother
Israel, 1998

While living in Kfar Chabad I became close to Reb Dovid and Chaya Chein and spent many Shabbos meals at their house. They were an elderly couple that had moved to Kfar Chabad from Russia after World War II. They were among the original founders of the village. Reb Dovid had significant influence on me. I was always embarrassed by being a “Russian.” Growing up being a Russian had caused me to be bullied in school. I also considered Russian immigrants as “off the boat” people representing the uncultured past that I was trying to escape. Reb Dovid taught me that being a Russian Jew is a badge of honor. He had witnessed Russian Jews sacrifice their lives to keep the flames of Judaism alive under the Soviet regime.

My twelve months in the *yeshivah* were truly transformative. I became much more proficient in learning Torah and learned how to properly focus during prayer. I also started working on internalizing Jewish knowledge to improve and refine my character. One of the central concepts in Divine service is humility, which leads to creating an inner space for the revelation of G-d's presence in the mind and heart.

BACK TO BUFFALO

I returned to Buffalo in the summer of 1998 to start my third year of medical school. Leaving the seclusion of the *yeshivah* environment was challenging. I had gotten accustomed to focusing exclusively on my spiritual development. Now it was time to return from heaven and deal with the mundane world. During my year abroad, I had even entertained the idea of leaving medical school and becoming a rabbi. Rabbi Gafne explained to me that I could serve G-d through being a doctor and strongly encouraged me to finish my medical studies.

One thing that made my life in Buffalo easier was that a new Jewish high school had just opened. The school used a house as a dormitory and I moved into this house. I helped the dorm counselors with the boys and occasionally gave lectures on Jewish mysticism. In return, I had catered kosher food, Jewish books, and a *minyán* right there in my home environment.

On one occasion, the boys from the school earned, by learning well, a weekend ski trip. Due to a last-minute schedule issue, I could not come. On the way back from the trip, the van that the

boys were in lost control and flipped over. Several of the boys were ejected from the van. The driver of the van was the son of the principal of the school. The principal came to me and asked me to drive him to the accident scene. On the way there, the principal told me that earlier today he suddenly had a strong urge to call this son. He called him right as the accident had happened. His son, the driver, was upside down and in shock. His father told him to turn off the engine and instructed him on what to do next to help the boys. Amazingly, no one was seriously hurt and they all came home from the hospital after being examined. There is a Jewish mystical teaching that states that a child is derived from his father's brain. Even after birth, this child maintains an intimate and spiritual connection with his father's thoughts. This story—as well as the previous story regarding the man in the coma who awoke when his son put on *tefillin*—illustrates this point clearly.

The third year of medical school was very different from my first two years. It was divided into six clinical rotations each lasting two months. The rotations included internal medicine, pediatrics, psychiatry, general surgery, family medicine, etc. Most of my time was spent in clinical interactions with patients in the office and hospital settings. I was still not sure of what area of medicine I wanted to go into. However, I really enjoyed interacting with patients.

It was interesting to me how much my perception of other human beings had changed since I had started my spiritual



journey. I no longer viewed other people as animalistic adversaries. Rather, I started to believe and perceive that human beings have a Divine spark within them.

After completing my third year, I decided on family medicine. This specialty really fit my temperament. I found family medicine to be a unique specialty in that you are required to be proficient in all areas of medicine. A family doctor must treat everything from newborns to geriatric patients and everything in between. More importantly, to be a good family practitioner you need to build trust and form relationships with your patients.

The fourth and final year of medical school was filled with clinical exposure to other specialties in medicine such as neurology, dermatology, rheumatology, and various surgical subspecialties. One experience that vividly stands out in my memory from this year was my rotation at Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo. I was exposed to various oncological specialties. These patients all had cancer and were very sick.

What bothered me most about this experience was that every time I would enter this cancer hospital, I saw a huge sign in the lobby that stated, “THINK ROSWELL.” The implication was that these sick patients should place their hope and faith in the abilities of finite human beings and institutions such as Roswell Park. In my opinion, this is an example of modern-day idol worship. The Jewish approach is to put all your hopes and faith into the hands of G-d. We believe that G-d gives a doctor permission to be a partner with Him in the healing process. We

pray that G-d should work through the hands of the doctor. The doctor is merely a conduit for G-d's blessing. I think the sign should have said, "THINK G-D."

During the fourth year, most medical students applied for their residency programs. I decided to defer starting my residency in family medicine for one year to accomplish some of my other goals.

CROWN HEIGHTS

In June of 2000, I received my M.D. degree and became Dr. Vladimir (Zev) Zelenko. It was a significant milestone in my life, which represented many years of intense effort. The following month I moved to Crown Heights to start learning at Yeshivah Hadar HaTorah.



Dr. Vladimir (Zev)
Zelenko, M.D.

My goals for this year in Crown Heights were to further solidify my skills in Jewish learning, to become a *mohel*,¹⁶ to find a residency program and—most importantly—to get married. I felt that I should get married prior to starting residency.

I knew that I would not have much time to search for a wife once I started working eighty hours a week.

Religious dating was very different from my secular experiences. For religious Jews, dating is focused and goal-oriented: to find a compatible spouse to marry, with whom

¹⁶ *mohel*: trained performer of the covenant of circumcision (*brit milah*).

to build a Jewish home. Much of the information about each other is screened prior to meeting face to face. Usually the parents of the boy and girl do extensive research about each other's families. Most of the religious, financial, and social compatibility issues are known in advance of the potential couple's first meeting. In most cases, a *shadchan*¹⁷ is consulted for suggestions of potential matches. My situation was different: my parents were not so familiar with the religious dating process. As a result, I had to do my own research and screening of potential candidates. I was not sure what I wanted or needed in a spouse. I knew that I did not want to be alone and that I wanted to have many children. I met many "interesting" types of people during the dating process.

On one occasion, I came to meet a young woman of Russian background at her home in Queens. I was greeted by her mother and grandmother and was thoroughly interrogated by them. I thought that they should work for the FBI. After passing their interview, I was permitted to proceed with the date. I decided to take her to a kosher restaurant for dinner. When I got to the restaurant, I had to make a U-turn to park my car. The girl informed me that I had just made an illegal



Rabbi Yaakov Goldberg,
Rosh Yeshivah
Awards Dinner, Yeshivah
Hadar HaTorah

¹⁷ *shadchan*: professional matchmaker for Jewish marriages.

U-turn. While making my order I asked the waiter for a soda. The girl advised me against products from this company since they did not support Israel. I realized that this girl was not for me but decided to have some fun. During our conversation, I asked her how she feels about my daily drinking, smoking, and staying out late. It was a short date. The next day, her rabbi called the matchmaker, wanting to know if I was an alcoholic.

On another occasion, a girl from Toronto, Canada was suggested to me. When I arrived at her house, her Georgian (not Atlanta) parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles greeted me. After the father asked me his questions, he called out in a strong ethnic Georgian voice “Zelda, come here.” Zelda came and gave me a shy smile. Then the father said, “Zelda, you can go.” He then looked at me and said, “If you are interested, have your parents call me.” I continued my search for a wife.

I had some disappointing and painful experiences while dating. One time a girl from Cincinnati, Ohio was suggested to me. I drove there and met her several times. She was very pleasant, and we had a lot in common. During our third meeting, she told me that her family suffered from a rare genetic illness that caused severe mental problems. I was shocked, disappointed, and angry. If the matchmaker had told me this in advance, I would never have agreed to meet her. But now I had met her and liked her. I was not sure what to do next.

After coming home, I consulted with three close friends. They all told me not to proceed further. I also consulted with

a religious geneticist and he told me to stay away. I called this young woman and told her that my mind was telling me one thing and my heart was telling me something else. I needed to follow my mind. She was very upset. The next day she called me and asked me to reconsider. I told her that I could not. I know she was very hurt and disappointed, and so was I. Many years later, I ran into her at a Purim event in Brooklyn. She was married and had several children, thank G-d. I was truly happy for her and asked for forgiveness for any pain that I must have caused her.

I continued to focus on my other goals even while searching for my future wife. As my learning progressed, especially in Chassidic mystical teachings, I developed a passion for teaching and spreading these ideas. I would give a weekly class to Russian Jews in a *shul*¹⁸ in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. I had around a dozen students of various ages. A few years later, I was asked to be a guest speaker at Hadar HaTorah *yeshivah*. After my talk, a student from the *yeshivah* approached me. He was dressed like and looked like a mainstream Chassidic student. He said to me, “Zev, do you remember me?” I did not recognize him. He reminded me that when he was thirteen years old, he and his father would attend my weekly class. He told me that I had taught him how to read Hebrew and explained to him the fundamental principles of Judaism. I had been privileged to plant a seed that had blossomed into something beautiful.

¹⁸ *shul*: Yiddish term for a Jewish house of worship.

I also started to learn how to be a *mohel*, from Rabbi Rami Cohen from Boro Park, Brooklyn. Amazingly, it turned out that he had been my *mohel* twenty-three years earlier. I wanted to learn how to circumcise my own sons for when the time would come. I traveled around New York with Rabbi



Rabbi Rami Cohen

Cohen for six months, watching and learning from him how to become a *mohel*. One day, a friend of mine from Buffalo called and asked me to help arrange his *bris*. He was a Russian Jewish archeologist who I had met at Rabbi Greenberg's *shul*. We became close friends and when he later reached the point that he wanted the *bris* he had not received as an infant in Soviet Russia, he remembered that I had mentioned to him earlier that I wanted to become a *mohel*.

Rabbi Cohen and I flew to Buffalo and we were met by Rabbi Greenberg at the airport. We all drove to Akron, New York, a very small town twenty-five miles from Buffalo. We arrived at my friend's home, which was an old farmhouse from the 1900s in the middle of nowhere. Rabbi Greenberg was *sandek*¹⁹ and Rabbi Cohen and I performed the *bris* on his kitchen table. Afterward, he chose a name and we had a festive meal all together. Rabbi Cohen told me that he had performed over

¹⁹ *sandek*: During the *bris* (*brit milah*) ceremony, the *sandek* is the person who holds the Jewish baby boy—or, in this case, adult—during the procedure.

thirty thousand *brisim* during his career, but this was by far the most unusual and special.

On another occasion, Rabbi Cohen was asked to perform a *bris* on an adult at a local community hospital in Brooklyn. He had special privileges that allowed him access to the operating room. I went with him to the operating room and met the Russian Jew who would be circumcised. He was a man in his fifties and was accompanied by Rabbi Zalman Shagalov. We performed the *bris* and he chose his new Jewish name. Afterward, I had a long talk with Rabbi Shagalov and learned that he was the rabbi of the synagogue called F.R.E.E. in Crown heights. That was the place to which my father had taken me to arrange for my *bris* when we had first come to America. Rabbi Shagalov invited me to come to his *shul* on Shabbos and then for a meal at his house.

Rabbi Shagalov was born in Russia during the worst days of Stalin's murderous rule. His father was a *mohel* who performed circumcisions, against the laws of the government. Rabbi Shagalov's father disappeared one day and he was never seen again. In the 1990s when the Soviet Union fell apart, certain classified documents were found. It was discovered that his father had been executed by an NKVD firing squad for counterrevolutionary activities.

I became close friends with Rabbi Shagalov and would frequently attend his *shul* on Shabbos. I felt at home with the Russian Chassidim and enjoyed the vodka, potatoes,

and herring that were served after *davening*.²⁰ Rabbi Shagalow would also frequently ask me to speak words of Torah in his *shul* after *Shacharis*.²¹

During my year in Crown Heights, I also started to apply and interview for residency programs in family medicine. I needed a program that would accommodate Shabbos and Yom Tov observance. In return, I was willing to work all Sundays and secular holidays.

The first program I interviewed in was at Jamaica Hospital in Queens, New York. The interview was by a panel of six physicians. Several of these physicians were African American women. As is customary, everyone wanted to shake my hand. I explained that I do not shake hands with women. The female physicians on the panel were offended. During the interview, I was asked how I would handle issues that contradicted my religious beliefs. I answered that my belief system is of prime importance in my life and that my professional career had to conform to my religious principles. I got everyone's attention by bringing up the example of shaking hands with women. I simply explained that professionally I had no problem with



Rabbi Shneur Zalman
HaLevi Shagalov,
o.b.m.

²⁰ *davening*: A “Yinglish” (anglicized Yiddish) word meaning prayer, or prayer services.

²¹ *Shacharis*: morning prayer services.



providing comprehensive medical care to the female gender. However, in a social context, I adhered to boundaries that reflected my values. I explained that one way that Judaism respects and honors women is by reserving touch for the proper context. One of the women said, somewhat jokingly, that she wants to become Jewish. I was offered a residency position with accommodations for Shabbos and Yom Tov.

This experience taught me that people respect someone who adheres to his values and is not willing to bend those values for professional reasons. For personal reasons, I declined the position and continued my search.

I eventually interviewed at the “South Nassau Communities Hospital” family residency program in Oceanside, New York. The program director was Dr. Sam Sandowski, an observant Jew. I was offered a residency position with accommodations for Shabbos and Yom Tov. I felt that this program was a very good match for me and accepted the position. Dr. Sandowski was instrumental in arranging the religious accommodations and became my professional mentor. I became friends with Sam. One time, over dinner, he told me a story of how the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, had given one of Sam’s children a blessing for a full recovery from a serious medical issue, and the child recovered. Just recently, this child had gotten married and Dr. Sandowski went to pray at the gravesite (Ohel) of the Rebbe on the day of the wedding.

Toward the end of my year in Crown Heights, I was introduced to Sima Chana Shollar. She was nineteen and I was twenty-seven years old. During our first date, we had a pleasant time and it seemed that we had similar goals. We both discussed having a large family built on the Torah and Chassidic values. We went out three times in four days (I took a day off not to go too fast) and decided to become engaged. When I met her grandmother for the first time, she asked me if I was a rabbi. I answered that I was a doctor. She misheard and asked me where my *shul* was. Therefore, I repeated that I was a doctor, so she said “Ohhhhh, A DOCTOR.” Two months later, we were married in Crown Heights.

MEDICAL RESIDENCY

We moved to Cedarhurst, Long Island and a few weeks later (July 2001), I started my residency program at South Nassau. Residency is a transitional period that takes a newly graduated doctor with no clinical experience and transforms him into a competent and independent provider. It involves very long hours of work, overnight calls, and experiences with life and death. For most doctors, residency represents their first direct exposure with intense human suffering and death. I had to learn how to break devastating news to patients, i.e., “I am really sorry to tell you that you have cancer.” We had to manage cardiac arrests and attempt to resuscitate patients. Frequently, the patient would die, and the resident had to inform the patient’s family of the bad news and then manage the emotional fallout.

During my first overnight call in residency, I was paged to evaluate a patient who was having an active heart attack. Simultaneously, I was also called to take care of a patient who had fallen and hit the back of his head, which caused bleeding inside his brain. Fortunately, both patients lived. I felt as if I

had been pushed into the deep end of a swimming pool and told to learn how to swim.

I found residency to be a maturing experience. It provided me with an opportunity to witness the full spectrum of the cycle of life, from treating newborns to providing end-of-life care and everything in between. The hours were long and exhausting by design. The rationale was that it takes time to assess a patient, order tests, wait for results, initiate treatment, reassess patient progress, and then make clinical changes if needed. I was always tired and had little energy for life outside of residency.

Toward the end of the first year of residency, my wife and I were expecting the birth of our first child. When my wife was in her third trimester, my mother got sick. One Shabbos, the phone rang, and I saw on caller ID that it was my parents' home number. My parents knew already that they should not call me on Shabbos unless it was a true emergency. I picked up the phone and my father said that my mother was in extreme abdominal pain and that he was taking her to Coney Island Hospital. I drove to the hospital to meet them. When I arrived, my mother was in the middle of getting a CAT scan. I went into the radiology control room and waited for the images to appear on the screen. When the test was complete, the images appeared, and she had a very large tumor in her colon. The tumor was obstructing the lumen of the colon and causing bowel obstruction. She needed emergency surgery.

My mother had bowel resection surgery to remove the large tumor: a piece of the colon containing the cancer was cut out and the two remaining ends were put together all in one surgery. Several days later, my mother was discharged home. The next evening, my mother called me, saying that she had a small swelling at the surgery site and did not feel well. I arranged for my mother to have an appointment with Dr. Sandowski the next morning. The next morning, while being examined, my mother developed a fistula²² at the surgical site. She had peritonitis²³ and required immediate surgery.

My mother was transferred to the emergency room at South Nassau and immediately taken to the operating room. The surgery lasted over ten hours. The surgeon came out to speak to my father and me and told us that this is a good time to pray. He had done everything he could, and it was now in G-d's hands. In the next few weeks, my mother required several more surgeries to clean up residual abscesses that had formed.

During this time, my first son was born. I performed his circumcision myself and we named him Levi Yitzchok, after the father of the Lubavitcher Rebbe and my paternal grandfather. I was working over seventy hours a week currently in residency and was struggling to keep everything together. I spoke to Dr. Sandowski and told him that I was having trouble focusing on

²² fistula: an abnormal passage between two organs, or between an organ and the outside of the body.

²³ peritonitis: inflammation, often caused by infection, of the inside wall of the part of the abdomen containing the stomach and other digestive organs.

work. He suggested that I take a few weeks off to take care of my family. I was confused about why G-d had superimposed the birth of my first child with the life-threatening illness of my mother. It did not seem fair.

Before my mother had gotten sick, she was a highly successful computer analyst for Morgan Stanley. My mother made a good living and she was highly respected. Now, she had colon cancer, underwent multiple surgeries, and would need chemotherapy. To me it seemed that she had lost her will to live and was wasting away. When my newborn son was discharged from the hospital on the second day of his life, we took him to visit my mother at her hospital. This was my parents' first grandchild. What happened next was a miracle. I brought my son into her room and put him in her arms for the first time. At that moment, I saw her will to live return into her soul. From that moment, she began the process of healing and recovery. Six weeks after leaving the hospital, my mother started chemotherapy. After six months of successful treatment, she underwent another corrective surgery. In retrospect, I understood G-d's wisdom regarding the timing of my son's birth. He came into the world at the precise moment that we all needed him. There is a well-known Jewish teaching that states, "When a son is born the entire family is healed."

I frequently worked on Sundays. Sundays in the hospital were relatively quiet in comparison to weekdays. I used to go to the receptionist and get a list of Jewish patients. I would go to visit these patients wearing my surgical scrubs, offering to put

tefillin on the men. I had a joke that I would use, that “I am here to check your Jewish blood pressure.” Most people were very receptive. On one occasion, I met an elderly patient who agreed to put on *tefillin*. I helped him, and we said the Shema together. One hour or so later, my code beeper went off. This usually meant that there was a cardiac arrest. One of my responsibilities as a house officer on call was to run the codes. I arrived at the patient’s room and attempted to resuscitate the patient. Unfortunately, he passed away. This patient was the one that I had put *tefillin* on and prayed with one hour before.

The second year of residency was an important time for me. My professional competency grew significantly, and I began to feel that I could practice high-level medicine independently and without supervision. During my third and final year, my beautiful daughter Esther Tova was born. I also started to look for employment for after graduation. I was contacted by a professional recruiter and told about an opportunity at Ezras Choilim Health Center. It was in the village of Kiryas Joel in the town of Monroe, New York. I had never heard of this community but was excited about this opportunity. I was concerned that after graduation I would not be able to find employment that would accommodate the laws of Shabbos and Yom Tov. I wanted to find work that could integrate my spiritual and material needs. Practicing medicine in a Chassidic community seemed like the perfect answer.

KIRYAS JOEL

I arrived in Kiryas Joel for an interview in March of 2004. My first impression of the village was very positive. It seemed to be a modest and genuinely religious community with many kids. Most residents of the village were Satmar Chassidim. The village had its own infrastructure, including Hatzolah,²⁴ public safety, fire department, health center, etc. It also had its own kosher supermarkets, butcher shop, pizza, and many other various stores. In addition, Kiryas Joel was filled with multiple *shuls*, *mikvaot*, a matzah bakery, and other Jewish infrastructure. It was a self-contained Chassidic village in a mostly non-Jewish part of Orange County, New York.

My interview at Ezras Choilim Health Center went well and I was offered a position for after I would graduate from residency. It seemed that G-d had answered my prayers by giving me an opportunity to practice medicine in a community that lived according to Jewish law. I felt that I could integrate

²⁴ *Hatzolah* (lit., “rescue”): Name of a network of Orthodox-Jewish-run volunteer ambulance squads in various Orthodox communities worldwide, staffed by highly trained Orthodox EMTs and drivers.

my professional, material, and spiritual needs by working in this Chassidic island in the middle of nowhere.

We moved to Monroe, New York in June of 2004 to start my professional career as a real doctor. I was scared and excited at the same time: scared because I was now independent and fully responsible for patient care; and excited for the exact same reason. My training wheels were removed, and I was free to practice medicine in the way I saw fit.

On my first day of work, a patient came to me regarding a fishbone. I few years before my arrival there was a woman who, sadly, passed away from a bone that was stuck in her throat. Since then, the community has been very nervous and hypervigilant about fish bones. Therefore, the patient told me the following story. Two days before, she was eating, and a fishbone was stuck in her throat. She went to the emergency room to be examined. The x-ray was normal, and the doctor did not see anything on the exam. The patient was instructed to follow up with an ENT doctor. The next day, she called the ENT doctor and she was given an appointment for the following week. She still felt the fishbone in her throat and was very anxious. Therefore, she went to a different emergency room. Again, the x-ray and examination were normal, and she was instructed to follow up with an ENT. The next day, she came to see me. I listened to her story and was skeptical that I could help her since I was not an ENT and did not have the correct equipment. She asked me to please try to help her. I looked

into her throat and saw a fishbone stuck in her tonsil. I took tweezers and removed it. It took about an hour for this story to spread through the community and I was a hero.

I learned a few things from this patient encounter. Firstly, information spreads in Kiryas Joel faster than light. Secondly, regardless of what other doctors have done, I should not be lazy to recheck everything myself. Lastly, G-d can make you famous using a fishbone. I honestly did not understand why so many people congratulated me on my brilliant work.

Moses Witriol, my next-door neighbor and head of the village's public safety, invited me to a barbeque the following Sunday. Little did I know that my life was about to change. During the barbeque, I met Moshe Aron Steinberg, the founder and head of Kiryas Joel Hatzolah. The next thing I knew, I was hijacked by Witriol and Steinberg and found myself in an ambulance heading to the Catskills. Apparently, a thirteen-year-old boy with a heart condition was in the emergency room of Harris Hospital in Liberty, New York. He needed to be transferred via ambulance to Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in Manhattan. To release the patient, Harris Hospital required that a medical doctor be present during and take responsibility for the transfer to Columbia. I was drafted for the task without being asked. The patient did well during the transport and I became unit number KY-76 of Kiryas Joel Hatzolah.

One day, while looking out of my window at home, I saw several Hatzolah vehicles drive by very quickly with their

lights and sirens blasting. They were obviously responding to some type of emergency. I followed them with my car and arrived at a neighbor's house several blocks away. When I entered the house, I saw our paramedic and EMTs trying to save the life of an eight-year-old child. The child had swallowed a small padlock and was barely breathing. While we held the child down, the medic inserted an instrument to try to remove the lock. It did not look good and I thought that we were going to lose the child. The mother was in the corner crying and praying. Then with G-d's help, the medic was able to grasp the loop of the lock and remove it. The child started to breathe more normally. The boy was taken to the hospital and he did very well. The next day he was discharged from the hospital and I came to his house to visit him. I brought a toy truck with no small pieces.

I was once invited to a thirtieth birthday party for Rabbi Pesach Burston, the Chabad-Lubavitch *shliach* in Orange County, New York. I was on his front porch talking to a friend. Suddenly, there was yelling and commotion from inside the house. When I entered, I saw an older woman—weighing around 250 pounds—choking, and a 150-pound man trying to perform the Heimlich maneuver, unsuccessfully. Everyone looked at me to do something since I was a doctor. I got behind her, wrapped my arms right below her diaphragm, and attempted the Heimlich maneuver. Nothing happened, so I repeated the procedure several times. Still, nothing happened,

and I started to feel the woman losing strength and about to lose consciousness. I yelled for a knife and a pen with a hollow tube so that I could perform an emergency cricothyrotomy. This procedure cuts a hole through a membrane in the patient's neck into the windpipe to allow air into the lungs. As I was waiting for the knife and pen, I decided to perform the Heimlich maneuver one last time. As I lifted the patient off the ground, a piece of chicken shot out of her mouth and hit the adjacent wall. The woman began to breathe normally and did very well.

Rabbi Burston and I have shared some interesting experiences. In July 2010, the Satmar Rebbetzin, Pessel Leah Teitelbaum, passed away. As is customary, many people came to her son, Rabbi Aron Teitelbaum, to pay their respects (*menachem avel*). A high-ranking delegation was



Chabad delegation being *menachem avel* Rabbi Aron Teitelbaum, July 2010



Rabbi Leibel Groner (right) and Rabbi Yaakov Schwei (far right) visiting my office after being *menachem avel* the Satmar Rebbe

sent from Crown Heights to visit the Satmar Rebbe. Rabbi Burston and I were involved. On another occasion, while working in my office, I was called by Hatzolah and asked to help inside an ambulance. The ambulance picked me up on the way to the hospital.

What I saw then changed me forever. A four-year-old girl had just been hit by a truck while playing and had a crushed skull. The child was not breathing, and she was being manually ventilated. I could see her brain matter through the crushed skull. Sadly, she died on the way to the hospital. The parents of the child were following the ambulance in their car. When we arrived at the hospital, I informed them that their beautiful daughter had died.

I had two children at that time: Yitzy, my three-year-old son, and Esther, my one-year-old daughter. When I came home that night and saw them sleeping, I had an emotional breakdown. For the next few months, I would call home multiple times a day to make sure that they were okay. I could not stop my obsessive worrying and compulsion to check up on them. I realized that I had a problem and needed help. I spoke to a wise and trusted friend who shared with me a teaching from an ancient Jewish book called *Duties of the Heart*.²⁵ The book simply explained that the Creator of the universe loves my children more than I love my children. Amazingly, meditating on this concept freed

²⁵ *Chovot Halevavot (Duties of the Heart)*: Main work of the 11th-century Spanish philosopher and rabbi, Bachya ibn Pakuda.

me from my obsessive thoughts. After some soul-searching, I concluded that the essence of my problem was a defect in faith. It was foolish of me to worry about things that I cannot control. My obligation as a parent is to create as safe an environment as possible for my children. The rest is in G-d's hands.

I really enjoyed being a member of Hatzolah. In addition to making good friends, I was also impressed by the volunteers' attitude and self-sacrifice. The organization was led by Mr. Steinberg, who had an unusual and out-of-the-box approach to patient care. I heard him frequently say, "It's much better for the patient to be illegally alive than to be legally dead." His concept was simple: treat every patient like family, do not be lazy, and advocate for the best care possible, even if it meant driving the patient extremely long distances. In other words, the patient was not abandoned in the emergency room of some local low-rate hospital but, rather, would be taken to the best place possible. We would even drive to the Harvard hospitals in Boston or the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio. In addition, we would contact the best doctors and make sure that the patient was seen timely. We would also follow up to make sure that the patient was getting better.

This approach to patient care really appealed to me and I started to integrate these concepts into my private practice. Patients find the medical system very confusing and indifferent to them. It is the doctor's responsibility to help the patient navigate the system. For example, if a patient

needs an MRI, they may get an appointment in a week or so. Instead, if my office calls, the patient usually gets the test and the results on the same day. This leads to more timely diagnosis and a decrease in anxiety.

During my practice of medicine in Kiryas Joel, I was privileged to witness frequent Divine providence. There were many instances in which patients' lives were saved through my involvement but it had very little to do with my skill as a doctor. I would like to share with you some of these interesting events. I have changed some minor details to protect the privacy of my patients.

One time a patient came to me with low back pain. After examining the patient, I ordered an MRI of his lumbar spine (lower back). I wrote the prescription as MRI L-S (lumbar-sacral) spine. The patient went to the radiology place to schedule the test. The secretary misread the prescription and ordered an MRI of his cervical spine (neck). She misread the L as a C. Keep in mind that the patient had low back pain, not neck pain. The patient had an MRI of his neck instead of the low back. The results came back saying that he had a dangerous herniated disc in his neck that could lead to paralysis. The next day he had emergency surgery to fix the problem in his neck, which resolved his low back pain.

On another occasion, a patient with LEFT-sided abdominal pain came to me. I examined the patient and ordered a CAT scan of his abdomen and pelvis. The next day the patient called

and told me that his abdominal pain had completely resolved, and he wanted to know if he should still have the test. I said “Yeah, why not?” The patient went for the test and a large RIGHT kidney cancer was discovered. The patient had surgery two weeks later and did extremely well. His initial complaint had nothing to do with his subsequent diagnosis except for the fact that it led to timely discovery.

Another time, I was talking to my secretary by the front desk of my office. An older woman approached the front desk. When she saw me, she got my attention with a very loud voice and said, “Dr. Zelenko, my daughter just had a baby and she has a terrible headache. Can you prescribe her a painkiller?”

I was irritated by the naive request and said to her, “Maybe she has meningitis?” Keep in mind that in my career I had never seen a patient with meningitis. I told the mother to bring her daughter to the office and I would see her right away. The patient came to my office and when I entered the exam room, she was lying down with her eyes closed and lights off. When I asked her some questions, the noise of my voice caused her severe headache pain. When I examined her, she had a very stiff neck and refused to move her head. I sent her right away to the hospital and she was diagnosed with serious meningitis. She spent three weeks in the intensive care unit and had a complete recovery, thank G-d.

One day, I walked into an examination room to see a young single woman deeply praying. She was there with her mother.

I asked what was going on. The mother told me that her daughter is a *kallah* (bride) and that she is getting married in six hours. Therefore, I asked, “Why are you HERE?” The mother told me that her daughter had some belly pain earlier this morning. She was sure it was just nerves, but she wanted to make sure that everything is okay. I examined the patient and did a quick blood test to check for infection. The results were concerning, and I advised the patient that she needed a CAT scan right away. They were not expecting this and were shocked. I convinced them of the importance of the test and assured them that I would expedite the process as quickly as I could. I had my staff call the insurance company and get immediate approval for the imaging test. I then called the radiology place and explained to them that I needed an immediate appointment for a bride on her wedding day. They told the patient to come over right away. She had a CAT scan and the results showed appendicitis, which is a surgical emergency.

The patient and her mother came back to my office and I gave them the results. I told them that they needed to go immediately to the hospital via ambulance and that she would need an operation. This was a shocking development for everyone involved. They asked me if they could have the *chuppah* (marriage ceremony) first and then go to the hospital. I said, “Absolutely not.” They told me that they needed to consult with their **R**ebbe first before they made any decisions.

They went to see Rabbi Aron Teitelbaum, the Grand Rabbi of Satmar. He told them, “A wedding we could reschedule but a life we cannot replace.”

The mother called me and said that they agreed to go to the hospital. I called Dr. Leon Pachter, the chief of surgery at NYU medical center. Dr. Pachter, who is an observant Jew, agreed to see the *kallah* himself. He was waiting in the emergency room when the patient arrived. The staff must have thought that the President of the United States must be coming in because Dr. Pachter was waiting by himself for the patient. As the patient was being prepared for surgery, the guests began to arrive at the wedding hall for the wedding ceremony. This was an international wedding with guests who had come from England, Belgium, Canada, and Israel. No one knew what was going on initially, until the family made an announcement. Fortunately, the surgery went well, and the bride was discharged home the next day. The following day, she got married.

I have frequently collaborated with leading rabbinic figures such as Rabbi Aron Teitelbaum. This is simply because many of my patients would seek advice from their spiritual leaders prior to making important decisions regarding their medical care. I have become personally very close with Rabbi Teitelbaum and his *rebbetzin*.²⁶ I occasionally seek their counsel regarding personal and professional matters.

²⁶ *rebbetzin*: The wife of a rabbi.

On a more whimsical note, I came to the Satmar Rebbe's house on the holiday of Purim several years ago. I had borrowed "Rebbish" clothing from one of my patients. I was dressed in a *shtreimel* (fur round hat), a *tilep* (a fur overcoat), a silver cane, custom-made Chassidic glasses, and the traditional white socks. I also came with my *gabbai*

(personal secretary), Yoel Wagschal; and my house *bucher* (personal servant) Elimelech Wagschal. We all went into Rabbi Aron Teitelbaum's private study and I was introduced as the Meditziner Rebbe (the medical Rebbe). When Rabbi Aron Teitelbaum saw me, he immediately recognized me and said in Yiddish, "*Bleyept azoy*" which means, "Remain like this."

Another important rabbinic figure I had met during practicing medicine is Rabbi Yisroel Avroham Portugal, also known as the Skulener Rebbe. A few years ago, Rabbi Hershel Ausch, who is a famous *dien* (rabbinic judge) in Williamsburg, called and asked me to see the Skulener Rebbe as a patient. It was 12 a.m. and the Rebbe was more than one hour away from me, in the Catskills. I got out of bed, woke up my Yitzy, who was eight years old at the time, and drove upstate to see the Rebbe. The reason I took my son Yitzy was that I wanted him to see and receive a *brachah* (blessing) from a truly righteous man. We arrived at the Rebbe's house at 2 a.m. His



The Meditziner Rebbe
on Purim

waiting room was filled with people seeking an audience and a blessing. We were taken into the Rebbe's private room right away. The Skulener Rebbe was in his late eighties and very frail. I examined the Rebbe, made a diagnosis, and ordered the appropriate tests and medicine. I then asked the Rebbe to please give my son a *brachah*. What happened next truly touched my heart. The Rebbe got up, asked for help putting on his *bekishe* (black silk coat), and slowly walked over to the sink to wash his hands in the ritual manner. He then put on his *gartel* (a belt used during prayer), and hat. He slowly walked back to his chair and gestured that my son be brought to him. This process, up to this point, must have taken more than ten minutes. He put his holy hands on my son's head and blessed him with closed eyes and deep concentration. This payment was priceless to me.

Several years ago, I was speaking to Moshe Aron Steinberg. He did not sound like himself. I asked him, "What's wrong?" He said that everything was fine. I asked him again what was wrong with him, in a more forceful voice, and he admitted that he was not feeling well. He told me that he had chest pain and had almost fainted in the morning. I forced him to call Dr. Roni Shemoni, a well-respected cardiologist, and he told Moshe Aron to come in to his office



Rabbi Yisroel Avroham
Portugal, Skulener
Rebbe

immediately. After being examined, Dr. Shemoni ordered a CAT Scan Angiogram (CTA)²⁷ of his heart arteries. The results were very concerning, and the doctor felt that a coronary bypass operation would be needed to fix the blocked arteries. He did not want to release Moshe Aron home since he would need to have a catheterization of his heart the next morning to confirm the results of the CTA. Mr. Steinberg, known to be a bit stubborn, convinced Dr. Shemoni to release him, and promised to be back in the early morning. Moshe Aron returned to Kiryas Joel and went straight to the Satmar Rebbe, the Grand Rabbi Aron Teitelbaum. I had already called the Rebbe and given him a full accounting of the situation. The Rebbe blessed Moshe Aron and said to him that everything would be okay. The next morning, Mr. Steinberg had a catheterization, which showed that his arteries were only mildly blocked. He did not need any bypass operation or even stents. Dr. Gary Roubin told me over the phone that “Someone must have prayed for him and cleaned out his arteries.”

Living in Monroe and interacting with Satmar Chassidim was spiritually maturing. The nature of people is to feel comfortable with like-minded people, and I was no different. My Judaism developed through the Lubavitch movement, and my exposure to other ways of thought within Orthodox Judaism was rather limited. I would even say that a certain

²⁷ This test combines an injection to the bloodstream of a contrast substance (dye), and a computerized tomography (“CT”) scan, to assess blood vessel function and disease.

form of spiritual arrogance had developed in me. I felt that my way was the best and looked down at people who were not like me. This way of thinking is the epitome of small-mindedness. A mature person can appreciate the beauty of other authentic approaches in serving G-d even if he does not personally adhere to that approach.

While practicing medicine in Kiryas Joel, I was fortunate to be exposed to some remarkable people. My interactions with them intrigued me and I wanted to learn more about the spiritual makeup of a Satmar Chassid. I learned that the essence of Satmar spirituality is the Code of Jewish Law and adherence to the customs of their fathers. Satmar Chassidim also believe that the only hope for the salvation of the Jewish people is the coming of the Messiah. The Satmar Rebbe, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, o.b.m., wrote in his book, *Al Hageulah*,²⁸ that there is no natural solution for the current problems in the Jewish nation. He believed that Zionism was against Jewish law and that Zionism has thus delayed the coming of the Messiah.

Rabbi Teitelbaum was not the only leading figure that felt this way. Rabbi Shalom Dovber Schneersohn (known as the



Grand Satmar Rebbe,
Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum,
o.b.m., the Divrei Yoel

²⁸ This title is Hebrew for: *To the Redemption* [from the Jewish people's current state of exile].

“Rebbe Rashab”), the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, wrote the following in his famous anti-Zionist letter: “To insure a permanent Redemption from our present exile, we must hope and wait for deliverance from the Almighty Himself, and not through the hands of one of flesh and blood. Only then will our Redemption be complete.”



Rabbi Shalom Dovber Schneersohn (Rashab), the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe

Even though I am a proud Lubavitcher

Chassid, I can still appreciate the wisdom of the Satmar Rebbe. Both Lubavitch and Satmar agree that the only salvation for the Jewish people is the coming of the Messiah. We may have different points of emphasis on how to actualize his coming. Satmar has focused on educating the world about the dangers of Zionism. Lubavitch has focused on helping other Jews connect with G-d and His Torah.

Unity is a central concept in Judaism. G-d is One, as we proclaim daily in the *Shema Yisrael* prayer. The Jewish people are one and are compared to a single functioning and living entity. G-d and the Jewish people are One in that our souls are derived from His essence. The unity between G-d and Jewish people can only occur when we behave as one. If there is baseless hatred and division among us, the bond with G-d and His people is severely damaged. One of the integral elements in bringing the Messiah is baseless love amongst the

Jewish people.

When I moved to Monroe, besides practicing medicine, I also tried to integrate myself into the community. I started learning in the morning at Heichal Rosenberg, which was a huge room in the main synagogue with millions of dollars' worth of Jewish books. Hundreds of people learned there in the morning. I used to arrive around 5 a.m. and would learn for a few hours. Then I would pray and go to work. I had my small circle of close friends with whom I would sit and learn. This was my routine for many years.

One of my *chavrusas* (study partners) and closest friends is Rabbi Pinches Hersh Reich. Rabbi Reich is widely respected for his incredible knowledge in the Talmud and Jewish law. There is a secular saying that the genius of Einstein is not that he thought of the theory of relativity, but rather that he could teach a child one-plus-one-equals-two. Rabbi Reich spent years teaching and refining my skills in learning Talmud. He also became one of my closest confidants for my personal struggles. He helped me acclimate to the unique culture of Kiryas Joel by teaching me the nuances of Chassidic living. He is truly my *yedid nefesh* (a soul brother).

One of my other *chavrusas* was the famous Satmar artist, Joel Gluck. We learned deep mystical texts from the Rebbe Rashab. After learning together for a few months, Joel asked me for a dollar from the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson used to greet thousands of people every Sunday and

give out dollars,²⁹ with a blessing, as they passed by the Rebbe. I told Joel that I only have one dollar for myself, but I would try to get him one. The next day, I came out of the Satmar *mikveh* in the big Satmar *shul* and saw my good friend, Levi Appel, sitting and fundraising for Hatzolah. I sat down next to him to help. One of my patients walked over to me and told me the following story: The day before, he had been in a store in New York City. He paid for his purchase and got back change. He noticed that one of the dollars had markings consistent with a Rebbe dollar. He thought that I would like to have it. I thanked him and took the dollar. I called Joel and told him that the Rebbe had just sent him a dollar.

Another person I met in Kiryas Joel who also had an important influence over my spiritual development was Rabbi Berish Kaufman. I met Rabbi Kaufman when he was a patient in my medical practice. I became close with him and we discussed various mystical teachings. It turned out that Rabbi Kaufman was well versed in kabbalistic wisdom and he offered to learn privately with me. For several years we studied together some of the deepest teachings from the famous kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria, o.b.m. This wisdom intuitively flowed through my soul and infused inspirational energy to all other aspects of my life.

²⁹ These dollars were understood as being for the receiver to give to charity (*tzedakah*). Most would give the dollar(s) of charity from their own money, and save the actual “Rebbe dollar(s)” given to them, due to the precious quality of the dollar having been handed to them by the Rebbe.

One morning while I was learning in *shul*, someone yelled to call Hatzolah. I ran over and found a very confused young married man lying on the floor. He had fallen off his chair. I asked him what happened, and he said he was not sure. I had my fingers on his wrist checking his pulse while talking to him. Suddenly, he became unresponsive and his pulse disappeared. I was still waiting for Hatzolah to arrive with a defibrillator. Without much option, I decided to perform a precordial-thump. Put simply, I hit his chest wall right above his heart, as hard as I could. This can generate a small electrical impulse in the heart. The patient suddenly regained a pulse and became conscious. He was taken to the hospital and he did well.

I really enjoyed learning the Torah in *shul* in the morning. It set the right tone for the day. One time, while learning, a young man came over and started to talk to me. He said that he wanted to thank me. I was not sure what he wanted to thank me for. He said that he knows “how busy I am, and that if I could make time to learn in the morning,” what about himself? He felt guilty and resolved to do some Torah learning every morning. I was moved by this story and realized that sincerity for G-d is contagious.

I believe that one of the most significant effects that my arrival to Kiryas Joel had was on *ahavas Yisrael* (the love of a fellow Jew). When I was in residency a retiring orthopedic surgeon shared with me his secret to success. He called it the three A's: Ability, Attitude, and Availability. He explained that to be

successful and effective, a physician must possess all three. For example, if a doctor is very able and has a good attitude but is not easily available then his effectiveness is diminished. I took this advice to heart and integrated it into my practice of medicine. I tried to make myself available as much as possible and my home was usually open to help patients. Hatzolah would frequently bring me patients after hours, at night, and on Shabbos and Yom Tov. After more than a decade of this approach, the effect on the community was profound. I was a Lubavitcher doctor serving the Satmar community who had become spiritually and socially integrated with that community. Kiryas Joel had become my home on many levels. Most people looked past our differences and focused on what we had in common. Acts of goodness and kindness had led to unity of Jewish hearts.

This unity became publicly evident during the inauguration of my Torah scroll. A



My father writing a letter in the Torah



Rabbi Fivel Weiss Reb Moshe Aron Steinberg

Jew is commanded to write his own Torah scroll. If he does not know how then he should pay someone to do it for him. I paid a *sofer* (a trained scribe) in the Land of Israel to write it for me. When it was finished, I brought the Torah scroll back home with me. It is customary to make a celebration like a wedding in honor of the new Torah scroll. I decided that the best place for me to make this celebration was in the center



Satmar Rebbe, Rabbi Aron Teitelbaum



Writing the last letter



After the *siyum*, The Satmar Rebbe speaking words of Torah

of Kiryas Joel. Thousands of people participated in the event. Words are inadequate to describe the beauty and unity that



Dancing in the streets of Kiryas Joel, 2012

was demonstrated on that day. If our Holy Temple was destroyed due to baseless hatred, it will surely be rebuilt with baseless love.



PRIVATE PRACTICE

After working for Ezras Choilim Health Center for five years, I decided to leave and open my own practice. Most doctors are terrible executives and have no idea how to start and run a medical practice. I had to learn everything from the beginning. Fortunately, I had several friends who were successful executives and they were willing to advise and help me. I had to borrow a lot of money to build out my office and for startup expenses. Giving up a guaranteed salary and going into debt to start a business took a real leap of faith. I had four children at the time and was not sure how I was going to meet my monthly expenses. What I noticed was that becoming an employer instead of an employee made my relationship with G-d more intense and intimate. I found myself talking to and asking G-d for help much more often.

Even though running a business had many headaches associated with it, I really enjoyed the autonomy of being self-employed. I was free to create a family work environment built on respect. My employees really enjoyed coming to work and this translated into loyalty and positive energy in the office.

My patients benefited from an office built on positivity and my sincere desire to help them.

Soon after opening my office, my mother called me from Brooklyn and asked me for a job. She was tired of working in the cutthroat corporate world. Every year a new set of young graduates would start working at Morgan Stanley. They were all hungry for advancement and were ready to step on everyone to get ahead. This reminds me of my past self. My mother was around fifty-five and had lost interest in playing these corporate games.

I was very happy to work with my mother. She is very intelligent, hardworking, and loyal. I trusted her implicitly and she became my office manager. However, there were some minor complications when working with my mother. The line between mother and employee became blurred. Hashem promises long life for properly honoring your parents because this commandment is exceedingly difficult to fulfill properly. I found it difficult to set healthy boundaries with my mother in the office. One time my mother walked into my private office without knocking and found me performing a sensitive examination of a male patient. Since then, she knocks on my door before entering.

Soon after my mother started to work in my office, my parents moved to Monroe. They moved out of their Brooklyn apartment that they had lived in since coming to America, thirty-nine years before. I helped them find a beautiful

townhouse in Monroe. I was happy to have them live closer to us (free babysitting). My children really benefited from having my parents living closer to them.

Not long after starting my practice, I became inspired to open a synagogue next door to my office. With the help of my good friends, we built a beautiful *shul* called Beis Medrash Shneur Zalman. It was named after Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the author of the mystical text, *Tanya*, and the Code of Jewish Law. We held daily prayer services and I gave a class in the *Tanya*. What was unique about this *shul* was that it blended Jews from all different lifestyles and levels of observance. There was a sense of real unity and brotherly love.

One of our regular attendees was Rabbi Fivel Weiss. Reb Fivel was known to possess one of the broadest and most brilliant minds in the Satmar movement. He was in his seventies and unfortunately had no children. I became extremely close with Reb Fivel and he became one of my most trusted mentors. We had a shared passion for learning deep mystical and Chassidic texts. Rabbi Weiss was instrumental in my spiritual development. Reb Fivel's life was a testament of Jewish maturity and faith. Even though he was not blessed with children, he accepted G-d's will and decree without resentment. I had many deep conversations with him over the years and was extremely impressed by his humility and connection with G-d.

Reb Fivel observed that I invested a lot of time into helping others but not enough effort into my own personal refinement. He helped me realize that I was using my outreach activities as an excuse and justification for not working on myself. He taught me to focus inward and confront my personal demons that were obstructing my spiritual and emotional growth.

One of these demons was my persistent feelings of low self-esteem. I had thought that my spiritual journey would help me overcome my feelings of low self-worth and perhaps it did to some degree. However, I still suffered emotionally and felt that I could be happier and more at inner peace than I really was.

I decided to see a professional and contacted Rabbi Daniel Schonbuch. He is a highly trained and experienced psychotherapist. As a side note, you the reader may be wondering why I am sharing with you my deepest fears and vulnerabilities. I have now been a doctor for many years, and I have seen and treated an unusually high volume of patients. I have observed and concluded that the most undertreated illnesses are emotional and psychological in nature. I have seen many families devastated by untreated mental illness. One of the major obstacles to patients getting appropriate help is the social stigma associated with psychological problems. My hope is that by sharing with you my emotional struggles, it may lessen the stigma and other people may seek help.

Rabbi Schonbuch helped me recognize some of the root causes of my negative feelings about myself. During one

therapy session, I was in a somewhat hypnotic state and remembered an event that happened to me when I was five years old. I was in the back seat of my parents' car. We were driving on Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn on a nice summer day. My window was open, and we were stopped at a red light. Another car with two people inside pulled up parallel to my parents' car. I overheard the woman in the car point to me, and say, "Look at that ugly child." As a five-year-old child, I was defenseless, and these words must have been deeply painful and damaging to me. I did not possess the psychological skills to properly deal with this assault on my self-esteem.



**Rabbi Daniel
Schonbuch, M.A.,
L.M.F.T.**

Fortunately, emotion lives outside of the realm of time. This means that a person may literally go back to a past emotional event. He can then relive that event, feel the pain, and more importantly reprocess what happened. Most people repress painful feelings as a defense mechanism. Unfortunately, this results in emotional weight that never goes away and frequently resurfaces with interest.

Rabbi Schonbuch helped me focus on this story and describe my emotional response to being called "an ugly child." He then guided me to reprocess the event using my mature forty-three-year-old mind. Being called ugly by someone else now

would have minimal effect on me at this stage of my life. My soul is a literal part of G-d, and my worth is based on my relationship with the Creator of the Universe. Reinterpreting the painful event with the above mentality freed me from emotional baggage that was weighing me down.

Reb Fivel's devotion to learning Torah, to prayer, and to his connection to G-d reminded me of Rabbi Gafne. One day, I called Rabbi Gafne in Israel to see how he was doing. Since leaving the *yeshivah* in 1998, I had kept in touch with him. He is my spiritual mentor. He told me that he was not feeling well lately and that he'd had a stroke a few weeks before. He was taken to the hospital, and, while waiting to be seen, his symptoms of the stroke resolved. When the doctor evaluated him, he was told that he could go home and follow up with his primary care doctor. He was also told that if the symptoms recur he should come back to the emergency room.

I was shocked by the professional negligence of this story. I told Rabbi Gafne that he needs to have further testing to figure out WHY he had the stroke. I suggested the appropriate testing and asked him to see his doctor as soon as possible. He called his doctor and got an appointment in two weeks. His doctor agreed with my recommendations and ordered the appropriate tests. Rabbi Gafne got an appointment for the tests 2 weeks later. After doing the tests, he received the results one week later. It had been approximately five weeks since my initial conversation with him. The results showed that Rabbi Gafne had a major

blockage of blood flow in the main artery that took blood from the heart to the brain. This was the cause of his stroke and he was at severe risk to have another one. I



**Rabbi Gafne, me, and my father
farbrengen in my house,
Monroe, N.Y., 2012**

suggested that he come to New York to be treated immediately. After consulting with his family, he agreed, and I bought him a first-class ticket to come to America. I met him at the airport and took him to Lenox Hill Hospital. This is the hospital to which I frequently admit my patients. I was well acquainted with some of the best doctors in the world, who are on this hospital's staff.

I called Dr. Gary Roubin, a world-famous interventional cardiologist and a pioneer in the field of angioplasty and stenting. I asked him to do me a favor and see Rabbi Gafne as soon as possible. Dr. Roubin agreed and evaluated the patient an hour or so later. He suggested an immediate corrective procedure to fix the 95 percent blockage in the neck. Before the procedure, I pulled Dr. Roubin aside and asked him to do me a favor and examine his heart for any blockages.

The procedure to fix the blockage in the neck was a complete success. However, the examination of the heart showed

blockages that would require multiple stents. Rabbi Gafne would have to recuperate for one month and then have the heart procedure. During this month, he lived in my house in Monroe.

It was a real privilege to have Rabbi Gafne stay with us. I carefully observed and studied his daily routine. To me, he exemplifies a person whose inner and outer being is one. He is a blend of genius and humility. Rabbi Gafne and I would go together to learn and pray in Kiryas Joel. His magnetic aura was quickly noticed and many Satmar Chassidim approached him for advice and counsel. It is not surprising that Reb Fivel and Rabbi Gafne gravitated toward each other. Even though they came from wildly different backgrounds and spiritual paths, the result was very similar. Both deeply connected to G-d, humble, and possessing refined characters, it was a true privilege and pleasure to watch these two special men discuss spiritual matters of Divine service. They seemed like kindred spirits and it was a real *kiddush Hashem*³⁰ to watch their *achdus* (unity) and friendship. Even now, many years later, people still reminisce and talk about Rabbi Gafne's stay in Monroe.

After a month, Rabbi Gafne had a successful heart procedure performed by Dr. Roubin. He needed to recuperate and so he stayed in my house for another month. My bond with Rabbi Gafne is difficult to articulate in words. We share a deep and

³⁰ *kiddush Hashem* (lit., "sanctification of G-d's name"): an action that inspires others to revere (or to increase their reverence toward) G-d.

soulful connection. After recuperating, Rabbi Gafne returned to the Land of Israel to continue inspiring and educating the next generation of G-d's soldiers.



Rabbi Schneur Zalman Gafne and Rabbi Fivel Weiss, o.b.m. Beis Medrash Shneur Zalman with my *sefer* Torah, 2012

As I am writing this, I noticed an interesting connection. In 1998, I was a student in Rabbi Gafne's *yeshivah*. I was contemplating leaving medical school and becoming a rabbi. Rabbi Gafne had advised me to finish my medical studies and serve G-d as a doctor. His advice may have very well saved his own life.

In 2014, we moved from Monroe to Monsey. My children were all going to school in Monsey and transportation had become prohibitive for us. It was much better for them to live closer to school since it cut down on the time they spent on the school bus. Socially, they were closer to their friends and were able to participate in more after-school events.

Since I was living in Monsey, I decided to open a satellite office there. I enjoyed the change of pace. The patients in Monsey came from very diverse backgrounds. I had Satmar, Vizhnitz, Lubavitch, Belz, Bobov, and Litvish patients. There were also wide ranges in levels of Jewish observance. Monsey

represents a microcosm of the Jewish people as a whole. In contrast, my patients in Monroe were uniform regarding being Satmar and their high level of observance.



Bris milah ceremony of my son Menachem Mendel: I was the mohel.
Rabbi Pinches Hersh Reich (top right), Reb Fivel (naming the baby), Rabbi Gafne (*sandek*)

While it was much better for my family to live in Monsey, I really missed living in Monroe. I had established a routine that provided me with spiritual structure. I had my *chavrusas* to learn the Torah with, a *mivkeh* that I would use every day, and my *shul* that I had built. I thrived spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally in Monroe. I found it exceedingly difficult to recreate this structure in Monsey. However, I did meet some wonderful people. I became friends with David Shmuel Greenstein, who I met at Rabbi Yaakov Twerski's *shul* in Wesley Hills. David Shmuel was a brilliant lawyer who had graduated among the top of his class from Yale Law School. We became *chavrusas* in a nighttime *semichah*³¹ program. I really enjoyed learning with his brilliant mind.

Around the time that I moved to Monsey, Reb Fivel Weiss

³¹ *semichah* program: a curriculum of Torah and Talmudic learning geared toward achieving ordination as a rabbi.

became seriously ill with a bone marrow disease. Besides treating him myself, I would also go with him to his specialist doctors. I was impressed at how he handled his illness with grace, faith, and humor. He wanted everything done according to Jewish law. This meant that every medical option needed to be explored to prolong his life. However, he was realistic about his situation and frequently told me that no one knows how long he or she is going to live.

Even while being sick and feeling weak, Reb Fivel continued to come to our *shul* and learn with me. It seemed to me that he had intensified his prayer and learning with literal self-sacrifice. Reb Fivel's wisdom helped me navigate very difficult personal struggles that I had in my private life.

In 2016, Reb Fivel needed to be hospitalized due to complications of his illness. He knew that his time in this world was ending and he asked me specifically, "How long do you think I have to live?" I told him that I am not G-d, but that I thought he only had a few days left. He thanked me and began to prepare himself. The passing away of Reb Fivel left a huge void in my life. I lost a mentor and friend. Reb Fivel told a few people that he viewed me as a son. He was filled with Divine wisdom and life experience. I was truly privileged to know and be close to him.

DIVORCE

A few weeks before Reb Fivel was hospitalized, my marriage with Sima Chana ended. This topic is very difficult for me to write about because she was my wife for fifteen years, we had six beautiful and precious children together, and my children will be reading this. The nature of humanity is to be curious about scandalous gossip. However, our divorce was not scandalous at all. We simply grew apart over the years and had completely different goals for our personal futures. We both share an intense love for our children and are trying extremely hard to work together to ensure that they thrive and continue to be *erliche* (sincere) Jews.

I was very moved when Reb Fivel came to visit me in my office after I got divorced. He was very weak and had trouble breathing and walking, and yet he still came to comfort me. I feel a raw wound in my soul when I think of my dear friend and teacher. I miss Reb Fivel terribly.

At the time of the divorce in 2016, my six children were: Levi Yitzchok, 14 years old; Esther Tova, 12; Eta Devorah, 9; Nochum

Dovid, 7; Shmuel Nosson Yaakov, 6; and Menachem Mendel, 4. Each child reacted to the divorce in their unique way.

The two younger kids, Shmueli and Mendy, were nonchalant about it. They just wanted to know when and how often they would see me. Shmueli asked me whether “I was still his father.” When I explained to him that I would always be his father, he smiled, kissed me, and went to play with his Legos.

Nochum took the news the hardest. We are extremely close, and it felt to me that his world was unraveling. He held on to my arm and refused to let me go. It is emotionally devastating to see your children in pain. I had to take Nochum with me to my parents’ house to console him and help him better understand what was going on.

Eta also took it hard and was very confused. She is a bit older, and with the proper explanation, she relaxed somewhat. Eta is very close to her mother and that helped with the transition.

My daughter Esther said, “She knew that this was coming.” I was amazed and shocked by her insight. *I had not known* that this was going to happen.

We also did our best to shield the kids from our disagreements. I guess kids have an intrinsic sense of the dynamics between their parents. Yitzy was initially shocked and very upset. However, after seeing how upset I was, he refused to leave my side. He went with me to my parents’ house to keep me company. He told me that he “doesn’t want me to be alone.” One time he was crying, and I asked him why. He said that he was crying

because of my pain rather than his own.

The trauma of moving out of my house into my parents' house in Monroe—and leaving my children—was horrific. I love my children and they are the focus of my life. I have always been very close to them. I enjoy spending time and just being with them. The thought of not having access to my beautiful children daily was devastating. I felt that the structure of my life was coming apart.

Moving into my parents' house in Monroe was an act of psychological regression. They took amazing care of me. They fed me, did my laundry, kept me company, and provided me with emotional support. However, I was a forty-three-year-old successful doctor who had been living on his own since the age of eighteen. Living back with my parents was a surreal experience. My father would ask me if I'd changed my clothes and taken a shower, etc. Living with my parents was a welcome but short-term solution.

I received conflicting advice regarding the divorce process. However, I gave Sima Chana a Jewish divorce (*get*) immediately and without any preconditions. Some people felt that I was foolish in that I surrendered a very powerful source of advantage when it came to child custody and financial negotiations. However, I do not believe that it is proper to use a religious device as a source of manipulation. After giving her the *get*, Sima Chana became my ex-wife in the eyes of G-d. The “civil” divorce would take another year and a half to complete.

When the news of the divorce spread in Kiryas Joel, there were different reactions from people. Most friends and patients offered their well wishes and gave me *brachos* for the future. I was really touched by how some of my friends wanted to keep me company and preoccupied. I am very grateful to them for being there for me when I really needed it. Working also helped me, but I found myself frequently crying between patients.

The best analogy for getting divorced is an amputation. The procedure may be necessary, but it is still very painful. Fortunately, I had a wonderful support network of family and friends who helped me during this transition. However, being single created some complications that needed to be dealt with quickly. I am a family physician serving an ultra-Orthodox Chassidic community. It is proper for someone in my position to be married and settled. For example, Hatzolah does not accept single members. I felt that, for professional reasons, I should start looking for a new wife as soon as I felt emotionally ready. In addition, I wanted to have a place of my own that my kids could come to and call home. I was also lonely. G-d's states, "It is not good for man to be alone."³²

One month after getting the divorce, someone suggested a woman who I might find interesting. I called her, and we had a brief talk. When I asked her where she lives, she said "somewhere between heaven and earth." I told her that I think she should stay there, and I continued my search for a wife.

³² Genesis (Bereishit) 2:18.

RINAT

Soon, I was introduced to Rinat Lustig. Rinat had been raised in Eretz Yisrael (Israel)³³ and had lived in New York for the prior ten years. She was forty-one years old and worked as a psychotherapist and psychoanalyst. We spoke on the phone several times and agreed to meet. After our second date, I knew I would marry her. Rinat was a breath of fresh air. I enjoyed talking to her and found her to be brilliant, mature, and extremely intuitive. She was sincerely religious, modest and very well versed in Jewish knowledge and law. The Talmud states that the quality of a man's second wife is according to his deeds. I must have done some very good things to merit Rinat. It is my personal feeling, that G-d rewarded me for not using a "get" as a weapon. I became spiritually and morally free to search for and find my new wife.

After dating for a few weeks, I wanted to introduce Rinat to

³³ Many Orthodox Jews prefer to refer to Israel as the "Land of Israel" or "Eretz Yisrael," due to the teaching that only at the point of the Redemption from the Jewish People's exile will we then have a true and G-dly reestablishment of the Jewish homeland.

my family and close friends. My concern was that since I was so recently divorced, perhaps my thoughts and feelings were clouded and compromised. I brought Rinat to Monroe and she met my parents. We all had a pleasant brunch and I could tell that Rinat made a positive first impression on my parents.

After meeting my parents, I took Rinat to meet the Satmar *Rebbetzin*, Mrs. Sosha Teitelbaum, in Kiryas Joel. The *Rebbetzin* and Rinat immediately hit it off and they had a long and deep conversation. Afterward, the *Rebbetzin* told me privately that I should go out with her another ten times but that she feels she is a good *shidduch* (match) for me.

Next, I took Rinat to meet Moshe Shmeil and Chana Landau from Refuah Helpline. They are remarkable people who sacrifice much in their lives to help Jews worldwide. Refuah Helpline is a medical referral service that aggressively advocates for patient care. I have worked with them professionally since my arrival to Kiryas Joel. Whenever I diagnosed a patient with a serious illness, Refuah Helpline would dedicate their expertise and connections to get my patients the best care in the world. Mrs. Landau knows more medicine than many doctors know and can gain access to world-class specialists in real time. They have been my very powerful partners in helping Jews. The Landaus invited us for dinner and immediately clicked with Rinat. They were extremely impressed with her and told me that I should grab her as fast as possible.

Finally, I took Rinat to meet Moshe Aron Steinberg. We have been best friends for a long time. Our bond has been forged through saving countless Jewish lives together for over fifteen years. Moshe Aron has been a constant source of support and encouragement for me for as long as I have known him. I feel and trust that the advice he gives me is altruistic and pure. After meeting Rinat, he told me that he was very impressed with her and that she is a good match for me.

After introducing Rinat to my parents and trusted friends, their consensus opinion confirmed my deep instincts about her. My judgment and feelings about Rinat were accurate and precise. She was an amazing woman, and I would be fortunate to have her as a wife.

The next step of our courtship was to fly to Eretz Yisrael to meet Rinat's family. We flew to Israel and spent Shabbos in Rechovot with her family. I met her parents, siblings, grandmother, and close friends. After making a positive impression on them, Rinat received approval from her mother. I asked Rinat to marry me on the way to the airport going home. Hashem had blessed me with a smooth transition to the next stage of my life.

When we arrived in New York, we received hundreds of congratulations. It was very exciting news, especially in Kiryas Joel. My office was inundated with countless calls from my patients and friends. It seemed to me that the community had felt the pain of my divorce and now the elation of our engage-

ment. A very intuitive patient once told me that I am “a family member to two thousand families.” Going through this life change, I realized how many people opened their



Moshe Aron Steinberg, Hershy Fisher (left), Joel Gluck (right) and me at the *l'chaim* (engagement celebration)

hearts to me. There is a well-known teaching in *Ethics of Our Fathers*³⁴ that states, “Rabbi Chanina the son of Dosa would say, ‘One who is pleasing to his fellow men is pleasing to G-d.’”

When it came to planning our engagement party, Rinat and I agreed to make it in Monroe so that the community could participate in the event. I was very excited to introduce my new *kallah* to everyone. The event took place at the home of my good friend, Shmiel Meisels. Hundreds of people came, including the *Rebbetzin* Sosha Teitelbaum and many other leading rabbinic figures from the community. Everyone who met Rinat was extremely impressed by her modest and regal demeanor.

I was amazed at how Rinat handled the pressure of meeting so many new people from a community that was foreign to her. She greeted everyone with poise and sophistication. I

³⁴ Talmud, Tractate Avot; also known as *Pirkei Avot*.

was relieved that she was able to acclimate herself to being in the public sphere. I hold a public position and that leads to scrutiny of people close to me. It takes a special type of person to thrive in such an environment. Rinat was a perfect partner for me in so many ways.

My three older children—Yitzy, Esther, and Eta—also came to the engagement party. It was the first time that they met Rinat. I wanted to wait until I was engaged before involving my children. Getting divorced was a very difficult change for them. I did not want them to experience any more unnecessary disappointments. For this reason, I waited to introduce Rinat until we were officially engaged. The next week, she met Nochum, Shmueli, and Mendy.

The older kids seemed to feel very comfortable meeting my new *kallah*. They were genuinely happy and excited for me. The three younger kids were confused regarding this new person in their lives. They were somewhat distant and withdrawn around Rinat. They were not sure what my getting engaged meant for them. I know that they were still hoping that I would remarry their mother. My engagement put an end to that fantasy and I am sure that was very painful. It would take time for them to get used to the new reality.

Six weeks later, we flew back to Eretz Yisrael to get married. The *chuppah* ceremony was a very private affair. It was held at a private location in Jerusalem. There was a *minyan* of men and a few family members. Rabbi Gafne came from Tzfat to

be at the *chuppah* with us. For the actual *chuppah*, we used my new *tallis* (prayer shawl) which I now use every day during *davening*. The ceremony was very simple and holy. It felt like a *chuppah* from a few hundred years ago.



Rabbi Gafne, my father, and me dancing at the wedding, Jerusalem, November 2016

Getting married in Eretz Yisrael was amazing. The day before the wedding, I went to pray at Kever Rachel (Rachel’s tomb) and drove to Tzfat to use the Arizal’s³⁵ *mivkeh*. The morning of the wedding, I went to pray in Hebron at Maaras Hamachpelah.³⁶ It was a surreal experience to pray on the day of my wedding and ask for *brachos* for our new life from Adam and Chavah, Abraham and Sarah, Yitzchok and Rivkah, and Yaakov and Leah.

The wedding reception took place in a beautiful restaurant in Jerusalem. Rinat’s family came from all over Israel. My parents and a few close friends came from Monroe and

³⁵ Arizal: Acronym—the “Ari” (lion), of blessed memory (*zichrono livrachah*—for Rabbi Isaac Luria (sixteenth-century Jewish mystic).

³⁶ *Maaras Hamachpelah* (lit., “double tombs”): The “Cave of the Patriarchs”—the ancient burial cave for the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Jewish People: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah.

Monsey. However, my children were not at the wedding. A mentor and a psychologist told me that it is more proper for them not to come. The rationale was that since the wedding was taking place only a few months after the divorce, it might be very difficult for them to properly process the event. I am not sure whether I agreed, and it pained me not to have my children there, but I followed the advice of the professionals. The day after the wedding, we traveled to Venice, Italy for a few days.

When Rinat and I returned to America, we moved to Englewood, New Jersey. Englewood was about halfway, in travel time, between Monroe and Brooklyn. Rinat still had an active practice in Brooklyn and needed to commute there several times a week. I suggested that Rinat become my practice's psychotherapist. I knew she would be a good fit. She speaks Yiddish and understands the unique nuances of religious Jewish life. In addition, she is a great listener and incredibly intuitive.

I had selfish motives for wanting Rinat to work with me. My schedule was very busy, and I was concerned that I would not have enough time to spend with my new wife. I wanted to drive to and from work with Rinat. We could also have lunch together. Therefore, after a few months of marriage, Rinat became my psychotherapist (pun intended).

The patients referred to Rinat absolutely loved her. Her schedule filled up very quickly and there was a waiting list to

see her. I was very happy that my new wife was integrating herself into various aspects of my life.

KIDS' VISITATION

I started seeing my children twice a week after work. We would have dinner together and then go to the park to play. I was really struggling with parental guilt. It pained me that I was not living with them and seeing them every day. My divorce and remarriage happened so quickly that no one, including me, had time to fully process what had happened.

The children had so many emotional, psychological, and material needs. It was my responsibility and top priority to make sure that they had the resources to thrive. Rinat understood and strongly encouraged consistent visitation. She felt that after so much recent change, they needed consistency and routine.

Whenever I came to pick them up, they ran to me with such enthusiasm and happiness. It touched me deeply and reassured me that my children wanted to have a close relationship with me. As King Solomon writes, “As water reflects the face, so one’s life reflects the heart.”³⁷ It was amazing to see and feel

³⁷ Proverbs (Mishlei) 27:19.

that my deep love for my children had penetrated their hearts over the years.



Nochum (right), Mendy (center), Shmueli (left) at my house for Shabbos

During this time, the “civil” divorce process was still going on. I recently decided to forgive and let go of anger and negativity. This is for reasons that I will explain shortly. Anger is a consuming fire that destroys oneself and the world around you. All I want to say about the civil divorce process is that it caused me a lot of aggravation and wasted time and money, and it put unnecessary strain on my new marriage. I give Rinat a tremendous amount of credit for her patience, tolerance, and support.

In addition to seeing the kids during the week, they also started coming to our apartment for Shabbos. The first Shabbos when I had the kids, all six came. It was as if a tornado hit the apartment. Rinat is an extremely organized person and our home is always immaculately clean. She also had not yet experienced having her own children. This created a complex situation that I did not know how to deal with. My parental guilt was weighing on me and I wanted to accommodate the children’s desire to be at my house. Simultaneously, I wanted to respect and fulfill my wife’s wishes. At times, this created

difficult choices between the needs of my wife and that of my children. It felt as if I was being torn apart in two.

I was sharing my feelings with a very close friend of mine, Yoel Wagschal. Yoel is also my accountant and former *gabbai* for the Meditziner Rebbe. I explained to him how difficult it was for me to manage conflicting needs of my wife and children. He advised me that I should focus on my wife's needs. I was in a new marriage and needed to build an everlasting and unbreakable foundation for the relationship. Once this was solidified, I could then begin to integrate and blend my children into our new home. This advice made sense to me. If my marriage was strong then it would naturally create a positive dynamic for my children. After discussing the situation with my wife, we agreed that two different kids should come for Shabbos, every other week. This rotation schedule created a much more manageable environment for everyone, including myself.

I recently asked Rinat, somewhat jokingly, if she was ready for the kids to live with us? She answered me with the following question: "Are you ready to parent?" This simple question has caused me to do a lot of painful soul searching. My understanding of parenting was to shower my kids with unconditional love, build up their self-esteem, and provide for their material needs. When I was having my kids with Sima Chana, I was very busy in residency and then building my career. I worked between seventy and eighty hours a

week and was not involved in the daily upbringing of the children. I regret this now and feel that I missed very valuable opportunities to bond with and teach my children.

Fortunately, a person can learn and change. Now, when the kids come over to my house, I am involved in the “small” things of providing care for them. For example: I feed them, bathe the boys, make sure they brush their teeth, dress them in pajamas, learn the Torah with them, say *Shema*, and put them to bed. As I am doing these things with the children, I feel a new type of unique joy and fulfillment. A new dimension to parenting has opened for me. I find it bonding and nourishing for the children and for myself. I have Rinat to thank for pointing out areas of improvement regarding my parenting.

With time, the younger kids have warmed and opened to Rinat. They have accepted her as my new wife and are slowly letting her into their hearts. This can be seen by the warm hugs and conversations they have with Rinat. From Rinat’s end, I also see a genuine connection and concern for their well-being. This dynamic is still a work in progress, but I am optimistic that Rinat and the kids will have a warm relationship. I cannot accurately put into words how important their bond and connection is to me.

After my civil divorce settlement was finalized, I found it much easier to effectively coparent with my ex-wife. The children really benefit from seeing both their parents being

able to work together regarding parenting. The kids are still so young and have so many diverse needs. It requires constant vigilance on our part to make sure that they continue to thrive. I still have a raw wound in my heart from the pain that they experienced—and are probably still experiencing—because of the divorce. I would much rather suffer myself than to see my children in pain. “A parent is only as happy as their saddest child.”

PRAYER

Rinat and I were really praying for Hashem to bless us with children of our own. Rinat was forty-one years old when we got married and she never had children before. I was very grateful to G-d for my six children, but I still wanted a larger family. I believe each child is an infinite blessing and is one of the main reasons for Creation. According to a well-known Jewish teaching, “Hashem created the world for the purpose of having a dwelling place in the lower realms.” The point here is that having children is the force that brings about the refinement of the world and the actualization of G-d’s plan. I also felt that it would be very good for our relationship to have children together. I feel that being partners in having and raising children creates a strong and unifying bond between husband and wife.

For Rinat, having children had essential psychological and emotional significance. If G-d were to bless us with a child, I would go from having six to seven children. Rinat would go from having zero to one child. It is obvious that, for Rinat, the importance of having a child was all-encompassing.

According to the “experts,” the odds were not in our favor. Fortunately, Jews are higher than statistics.

We decided to make a great effort to merit G-d’s blessing. We prayed individually



Rabbi Chaim Zanus
Abramowitz



Rabbi Yeshaya
Steiner

and together. We visited the gravesites of very holy and righteous people here in America and in Eretz Yisrael. We went separately to the *kevorim*³⁸ of the sixth and seventh Lubavitcher Rebbes—Menachem Mendel Schneerson, and Yosef Yitzchok Schneerson, in Queens (New York). We also visited together the *tzion*³⁹ of the Ribnitzer Rebbe, Rabbi Chaim Zanus Abramowitz, in Monsey. Then we traveled to Eretz Yisrael and went to the *kevorim* of the Rashbi, Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai in Meron; HaTana Cruspidi in Ein Zetim; and the Arizal, Rabbi Yitzchok Luria, in Tzfat. At all these places, we beseeched Hashem to bless us with children. Moshe Aron Steinberg also sent letters on our behalf to the *kevorim* of the Divrei Yoel, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum in Monroe; the

³⁸ *kever* (pl.: *kevorim*): gravesite.

³⁹ *tzion* (literally, “sign”): gravestone/marker of a grave. In this context, another way of saying “gravesite.” This word is also used: to refer to the City of David—the Jerusalem of ancient times, south of the modern-day city of Jerusalem; when referring to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem; and, metaphorically, to the Jewish People as a whole. It is sometimes Anglicized to “Zion,” as in, “Zion shall be redeemed through justice and her penitent through righteousness” (Yeshayahu [Isaiah] 1:27), etc.



Beirach Moshe, Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum in Monroe; and Rabbi Yeshaya Steiner of Kerestir.

Shortly after our efforts, Hashem blessed us with miraculously good news.

Words fail to accurately convey the elation that Rinat and I both felt.



**Lubavitcher
Rebbe**



**Grand Satmar Rebbe
Rabbi Moshe
Teitelbaum, o.b.m.**

SHIRA

One month before Rinat's due date (January 2018), I started feeling not well. I rather suddenly developed a bad cough and trouble breathing when walking up steps. I thought it was bronchitis and treated myself with antibiotics. I felt a little better, but the symptoms persisted. I then treated myself for bronchospasm—an asthma-like syndrome—with an inhaler, which helped. However, my shortness of breath persisted. One night, Rinat was very concerned about my breathing while I was sleeping. The next morning, she made me make an appointment with her doctor, Dr. Lara Zilberstein in Englewood. I did not want to go since doctors make the worst patients. However, for martial harmony reasons, I obeyed. After seeing the doctor, she ordered a chest x-ray, which showed “something.” Next, Dr. Zilberstein ordered a CAT scan of my chest. The results showed a large saddle pulmonary embolus. This is a huge blood clot at the bifurcation (split) of the pulmonary artery, which is the vessel that takes blood to both lungs from the heart. This was a life-threatening emergency and Hatzolah took me to Lenox Hill Hospital's emergency room.

I chose Lenox Hill because I am very familiar with their system and work with many of the specialists there. I frequently admit patients to this hospital. Abraham Steinberg, Moshe Aron's son, is a nurse there and a very important asset in helping Jews. He strongly advocates for patient care and helps move the system for the patient's benefit. Hospitals are dangerous places, and everyone needs advocates to protect themselves.

I asked Dr. Bushra Mina, a renowned pulmonary and critical care specialist, to see me. Dr. Mina is a friend and comes to my office in Monroe to see patients. He was very concerned about me and I was transferred to the intensive care unit. I was also seen by a hematologist, cardiologist, and vascular surgeon. Everyone agreed with the initial diagnosis and I was put on blood thinning medication. After a few days, I started to feel better and I was discharged home. The plan was to take blood-thinning medication for a few months and then repeat a CAT scan in three months to make sure that the clot had resolved.

On February 27, 2018, with the biggest gratitude to Hashem, our new baby, Shira, a daughter, was born. Mother and baby did extremely well, thank G-d. Shira was the epitome of perfection and was evidence to us of Hashem's revealed and miraculous



Baby Shira

kindnesses. Rinat was forty-three years old when Shira was born. I cannot even begin to fathom how she must have felt when she saw and held our new baby daughter for the first time.

For me, the birth of Shira was unusually emotional and precious. My youngest child was Mendy, who is six years old now, and I was told in my previous marriage that I was done having more children. I had to come to terms with not having any more children even though deep in my heart I really wanted my family to continue to grow. Now that Hashem and Rinat gave me Shira, I feel tremendous gratitude, blessing, and joy.

The next Shabbos we made a *kiddush*⁴⁰ in honor of the birth of Shira in Tefillah L'Moshe *shul* in Kiryas Joel. I chose this *shul* because many of my close friends pray there. Rinat, Shira, and I were supposed to stay at the house of my close friend Akiva Klein who lives down the street from the *shul*. However, fortunately, Akiva's daughter had also a baby that week and the guest accommodations were not available. Therefore, we ended up staying by the wonderful family of Yanky Stuhl. His house was a ten-minute walk to Tefillah L'Moshe *shul*, down a steep hill (this is an important detail). Shabbos morning, we walked down the hill to the *shul*. After *davening*, there was a

⁴⁰ *kiddush* (lit., “sanctification”): the blessing made over wine at the beginning of a Shabbat or holiday meal. In this context, further beautifying the *mitzvot* of Shabbat and *kiddush* with a festive gathering in honor of a blessed event such as the birth of a baby girl.

beautiful *kiddush* with hundreds of people stopping by from other *shuls* to wish us *mazal tov*.⁴¹

After the *kiddush*, we walked to Yanky Stuhl's house UP this steep hill. I started to feel very short of breath and weak. I literally had to hold on to my friend Ephraim Weiss who was walking with me. By the time I got to my host's home, I was really feeling sick. I went to my room looking for Rinat. Suddenly, I started violently coughing up a lot of blood. It felt like I was drowning in my own blood. When Rinat saw this, she became frightened and worried. I called Hatzolah and they arrived within two minutes. I was taken back to Lenox Hill's emergency room. Little did I know that my life was about to change forever.

⁴¹ *mazal tov* (lit., "good heavenly configurations"; in Torah astrology, the signs of the zodiac are called the plural of *mazal*: *mazalot*): The Hebrew and Yiddish way of saying "Congratulations!"

CANCER

When I arrived in the Emergency Room, the doctor ordered another CAT scan. The results showed worsening of the blood clot. The clot had now extended further into the right lung, causing areas of infarction (tissue death). The blood-thinning medication had failed. There was also concern that I was developing right heart strain from pulmonary hypertension.⁴² My condition was life-threatening, and urgent intervention was needed. Dr. Mina transferred me to the intensive care unit. He consulted a cardiac surgeon, Dr. Derek Brewster. We discussed two treatment options: using clot-busting medication (TPA) or surgery to remove the blood clot. I spoke to Dr. Mina, Dr. Berkowitz, and Moshe Aron Steinberg for advice. After reaching a consensus, I decided on an open chest procedure called a pulmonary artery thrombectomy. Simply put, the surgeon opens my chest with

⁴² In this condition, blood pressure in the arteries of the lungs becomes dangerously high, putting great stress on the right side of the heart—the side that collects the oxygen-poor blood from the veins of the body overall and pumps this blood to the lungs for oxygenation and removal of carbon dioxide.

a saw, cuts into the pulmonary artery and removes the blood clot. I was not looking forward to major chest / heart surgery, but this was my best option.



Dr. Bushra Mina



Dr. Israel Berkowitz

The fact that I did not choose the clot-busting option was fortunate and probably saved my life. I will explain shortly.

The surgery was planned for the next day. That evening, I had Rinat, Shira, my parents, and Yitzy in my hospital room with me. I was scared and anxious. I had sent hundreds of patients for major surgery during my career, but now I was the patient. I prayed to G-d that He should work through the surgeon's hands and asked for forgiveness for my past wrongs. I called Wolf Perl, my life insurance agent, and asked him to come to the hospital. I wanted to make sure that my life insurance policies were intact and that my wishes were accurately expressed.

Moshe Aron Steinberg stayed with me overnight. I was very relieved that my best friend was with me on the eve of surgery. I was anxious, perhaps more than the average person was. Since I am a doctor, I knew exactly what was going to be done to me. As a student and resident, I had participated in several similar surgeries. It put my mind at ease to have my

friend with me. During the night, Moshe Aron noticed that my oxygen level had dropped, and I was having trouble breathing. He alerted the nurse and I was put on oxygen, which helped me breathe better. It is so important for a patient to have an advocate with him in the hospital. I have seen it prevent major medical errors and save lives.

The next day, I was transferred to the surgery wing. I said goodbye and expressed my deep love for Rinat, baby Shira, my parents, and Yitzy. They were asked to go to the surgery waiting area. I also called and spoke to my other children and told them how much I love them.

The nurse prepared me for surgery and the anesthesiologist came and examined me. Dr. Brewster also came and reassured me. He explained that this is a “simple” procedure and that everything will be fine. I was wheeled into the operating room. It was a huge room with powerful lights, many surgical instruments lying ready on organized trays, and around ten medical personnel waiting for me. I was transferred from the stretcher to the operating table. The table was heated, and it felt somewhat nice, in a surreal way. The anesthesiologist came and placed an IV into my arm. I was lying and looking at the ceiling. My thoughts were surprisingly calm, and I quietly spoke to G-d. Then the anesthesiologist put some drugs into my IV and I fell asleep. Obviously, I do not recall what happened next since I was under anesthesia. However, I was able to piece together the sequence of events from speaking to my doctors,

family, and friends.

Dr. Brewster, my cardiac surgeon, sawed through my sternum (breastbone), pulled apart my ribs, gained access



Dr. Derek Brewster



Dr. Richard Lazzaro

to my heart, and located my pulmonary artery. I was put on a heart-lung bypass machine and my heart was stopped. Dr. Brewster then cut into the pulmonary artery to locate and remove the suspected saddle embolus (blot clot). Unfortunately, he did not find a blood clot. That explains why the blood-thinning medication did not work.

Dr. Brewster did find a large tumor, originating in the pulmonary artery and extending into the arteries of the right lung. The lung also showed evidence of infarction (tissue death). A small biopsy was made of the tumor and sent to the pathology lab for a frozen section (immediate intraoperative⁴³ biopsy result). At this point, Dr. Brewster came out of the operating room and went to the waiting room to speak to my family. Dr. Bushra Mina and Dr. Israel Berkowitz (my physicians, colleagues, and friends) were present during the surgery and came to speak to my family. They explained that instead of a blood clot, a tumor was found. Dr. Brewster also

⁴³ intraoperative: during the operation.

said that he requested a thoracic surgeon to join him to assist in the surgery.

Dr. Richard Lazzaro, a renowned cardiothoracic surgeon who specialized in lung removal, was consulted. Dr. Lazzaro had just finished another surgery and was still in the hospital. He joined Dr. Brewster in the operating room and assessed my medical and surgical situation. It was discovered that my right lung was filled with the tumor and mostly dead from lack of blood supply. The results of the intraoperative biopsy confirmed a cancerous tumor called a sarcoma.

Both surgeons decided on a complex course of action. Dr. Brewster would cut out the tumor from my pulmonary artery and then reconstruct the artery using bovine pericardium (heart sac tissue from a cow). I could not live without a functioning pulmonary artery that took blood to my remaining left lung. Dr. Lazzaro would perform a pneumonectomy (complete lung removal) of my right lung. The lung was dead and filled with the tumor. It needed to be removed.

Rinat was holding our ten-day-old daughter in her arms when the news was broken to her. She felt like a truck hit her. My parents and oldest son were also present and were in shock. My mother was in disbelief and started searching online about sarcoma. She knew that it was an extremely deadly form of cancer. My son, Yitzy, asked the surgeon about my quality of life with one lung. My father started

saying *Tehillim*.⁴⁴ Dr. Lazzaro explained that my best chance for survival was to surgically remove the right lung and the tumor in the pulmonary artery.

The surgery lasted eight hours and I was transferred to the recovery unit. The surgeons told my family that the operation went extremely well and that they were able to remove the entire tumor with clean margins. Dr. Lazzaro said, “If it was known before that the lesion was a tumor and not a blood clot, nobody would have operated on me.” Dr. Mina said that if I would have received the clot busting drug (TPA), it would have caused the tumor to break up and seed my remaining left lung. That would have been a death sentence, G-d forbid.

Sarcoma of the pulmonary artery is extremely rare, with less than ten people a year being diagnosed with it in the world. Most people die from it because of its location and late diagnosis. It is usually discovered at autopsy. In my case, I had surgery for a suspected blood clot that led to a fortuitous diagnosis. The doctors were able to perform heroic surgery that is almost never done.

Everyone went to the recovery room area and waited for permission to see me. After an hour or so, my family was allowed into my room. I was sedated, intubated (breathing tube in my airway), and had two IVs, plus multiple surgical blood drains, and a Swan-Ganz catheter⁴⁵ in my neck. It was

⁴⁴ *Tehillim*: Psalms.

⁴⁵ Swan-Ganz catheter: a device that measures blood pressure in the

very difficult, shocking, and painful for my family to see me like this.

Everyone was emotionally and physically exhausted. The day had been filled with terrible surprises and unexpected events. My parents and Yitzy left the hospital and went to pray for me at the *Ohel*⁴⁶ of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. My wife was less than two weeks postpartum with a nursing infant. She was sleep deprived and still physically recovering from having a baby. She drove home from the hospital with Shira, who was crying all the way home. Fortunately, her mother was coming from Israel the next day to help Rinat handle everything.

Several of my friends came to the hospital during the surgery. They kept my family company and tried to reassure them that everything would be okay. One of my friends, Joel Meisels, stayed with me in the recovery room overnight. Abraham Steinberg, (Moshe Aron's son, whom I mentioned earlier, a registered nurse from Lenox Hill Hospital), joined him. Apparently, I started to regain some consciousness and began to pull on the breathing pipe to remove it. The nurses were alarmed and wanted to restrain my arms so that I did not pull the tube out. Abraham witnessed this and intervened. He did not let the nurses restrain me and convinced the doctor to try to have me extubated. Fortunately, the tube was removed

pulmonary artery.

⁴⁶ *Ohel* (lit., "tent"): A structure built around the grave of deceased person, showing that the deceased was a prominent figure—usually a great rabbi or communal leader.

successfully, and I was able to breathe on my own. I can only imagine the pain, frustration, and anxiety that I would have experienced if the breathing tube had remained, unnecessarily restraining me. I do not remember any of this.

One of the nurses asked Joel Meisels, “Why does this guy get so much attention?” He answered, “He is a doctor, and this is how he would treat any of his patients.” She then asked Joel, “Are you his son?” He told her, “Since he treats me like a son, I treat him like a father.” The nurse became very emotional and asked, “But why do the doctors treat him like a VIP?” Joel answered, “He is highly respected by his colleagues, and some of the doctors here work in his office.”

Joel also told me that he stayed by my bedside and said *Tehillim*. He said to G-d, “It will be a real *kiddush Hashem* if Dr. Zelenko is healed. Last Rosh Hashanah, I thought I needed to be admitted to the hospital. Dr. Zelenko treated me outside of *shul* and prevented me from going to the hospital.”

I have a very vague recollection of the following day. I remember Rinat coming, and me talking to a doctor, but I do not recall what he said. It was Dr. Lazzaro and apparently, he told me about the diagnosis. I was very heavily medicated with pain medication. It would take another day before I was alert enough to begin to process my new reality. My father and Yitzy stayed with me overnight in the hospital. My father told me that I was in severe pain the whole night. He had to hold me most of the night and help me find a position that was the least

painful. He said it was a horrific night for me and he felt very helpless. I do not recall that night.

On the third day, I was much more aware of my surroundings and in severe pain. During the surgery, I'd had a sternotomy. This is a procedure where the surgeon cuts through the sternum and afterward uses metal wire to close the chest and put the breastbone back together. In medicine, this procedure is considered one of the most painful.

Every time I moved, sneezed or coughed the severity of the pain was beyond anything I had ever experienced. It hurt to breathe and talk, and I was given heavy narcotics, which numbed the pain somewhat. I do not recall how but I was moved from the bed to a chair. Then the physical therapist came and told me that I had to try to walk. I tried to get up with the help of the therapist and my father. The next thing I remember was a group of doctors and nurses standing over me and yelling at me. Apparently, I had passed out from the severe pain and become unresponsive for around a minute.

Dr. Lazzaro came to examine me. It was the first time that I recall meeting and talking to him. He was an extremely soft-spoken and refined man. He explained to me that Dr. Brewster had asked him to assist during the surgery. The diagnosis was sarcoma of the pulmonary artery and not a blood clot. The tumor was excised, the artery reconstructed, and the right lung was completely removed. The lung had to be removed because

the cancer had spread into the arteries and caused infarction in most of the lung. The lung was essentially dead.

My parents and Rinat were in the room when Dr. Lazzaro was talking to me. Afterward, Dr. Richard Lazzaro spoke privately to my mother. He said to her that when he started to operate he felt “an unusual presence of G-d” with him in the operating room. I had heroic and highly unusual surgery performed on me that in most cases would have never been done. The sequence of events that led up to the surgery appears to have been perfectly orchestrated to save my life, *IY”H*.⁴⁷

During the next several days, I had someone with me twenty-four hours a day. Moshe Aron Steinberg took it upon himself to make sure that I was never alone. Yitzy got special permission to take time off from his school and spent most of the days with me. Yitzy encouraged and helped me start walking around on the hospital floor. The pain was unbearable, and I had to take heavy pain medicine to be able to walk.

Rinat’s mother had come from Israel and helped with taking care of the baby. Rinat would come every day and she was obviously exhausted and emotionally strained. I felt terrible that she had to deal with my illness, especially so soon after having a baby. What should have been a joyous time, turned into a time of worry and anxiety.

I had many visitors come and wish me well. The Satmar

⁴⁷ *IY”H*: *Im yirtze Hashem*: if it is the will of G-d.

Rebbe, Rabbi Aron Teitelbaum, came to visit me as well. His *Rebbetzin* also came to see me. It was very moving and special to know that so many people were praying for my recovery. I was still in shock and disbelief and had not begun to understand what had happened to me. The pain and the pain medicine kept my mind cloudy. Even as I am writing this book, the memories are vague, and I had to interview the people who were there to get an accurate picture.



The Grand Satmar Rebbe, Rabbi Aron Teitelbaum, *shlita*⁴⁸ and Moshe Aron Steinberg visiting me in the hospital

Five days after the surgery, which was erev Shabbos,⁴⁹ Dr. Mina came to tell me that the final biopsy report had been completed. The results confirmed that it was a highly aggressive form of sarcoma of the pulmonary artery and that it had spread to multiple sites in the right lung. It was absolutely the correct decision to remove the lung. The results also confirmed that the surgical margins were clean. This means that the edges where the surgeon cut were free of any obvious disease. He also told me that I needed to see an oncologist and would need chemotherapy six weeks after the surgery.

⁴⁸ *shlita*: an acronym for the Hebrew phrase: *Sheyichye leorech yomim tovim, amein* (May he live long and live well, Amen!).

⁴⁹ *erev Shabbos*: The day before the Sabbath; that is: Friday.

Reality finally hit me; I had serious cancer that almost no one survives. I went into surgery thinking that I had a blood clot and when I awoke, I had sarcoma and was missing a lung. I began to feel anxiety, fear, and dread. My father and son spent Shabbos with me. That night I had multiple panic attacks and my father had to get the nurse to help me. She called the doctor and I was given Xanax⁵⁰ to relax me.

⁵⁰ Xanax: trade name for a specific antianxiety drug.

COMING HOME

Nine days after my surgery, I was discharged from the hospital and allowed to go home. At this point, I was able to walk for around a minute and then needed to stop and catch my breath. I had a persistent cough and had no appetite. I was in constant pain, made worse by the coughing, and I was taking oral narcotics, which helped for a short period. My friend, Joel Rubin, picked me up from the hospital and drove me home to Englewood. When I came home, Rinat, her mother, and Shira were waiting for me. It was nourishing to the soul to be back home with my family. I held my three-week-old baby daughter in my hands, and became very emotional and broke down crying.

For the next week, I focused on pain control and breathing. I was still on pain medication and needed to use oxygen. I had to sleep sitting up in a recliner since lying down was too painful and made breathing difficult. Rinat was a great help and took wonderful care of me.



That I week I had several very bad coughing episodes that led me to lose consciousness. Rinat witnessed these episodes and it really frightened her. I cannot fathom how she felt during this time. Rinat had to juggle taking care of a newborn and a husband with cancer. That put incredible emotional strain on her. The way Rinat managed the situation is a testament to her strength of character and commitment to her family.

My younger children came to visit, but it created mixed emotions within me. I was thrilled to see them, but it caused me great pain at the thought of the possibility that they could be orphans soon, G-d forbid. They were scared and filled with many questions. They wanted to understand what had happened to me. The kids had made their own unique get-well cards for me.

There are five known stages of grief and loss:⁵¹ 1. Denial; 2. Anger; 3. Bargaining; 4. Depression; 5. Acceptance. The first week after the surgery, I was in denial about what had happened to me. My mind could not psychologically process and accept that I had bad cancer.

However, after the initial shock had worn off, my new reality hit me: I became very angry. I asked internally, “Why me? I am the doctor: the one who tells OTHERS that they are sick. How could it now be me?”

What bothered me most of all was not my potential death,

⁵¹ The theory of the “Five Stages of Grief and Loss” originated from the work of American-Swiss psychologist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1926–2004). Her most famous book is *On Death and Dying*, in which she first put forth her “Five Stages” theory.

G-d forbid; rather, the effect that my death would have on the people I love. Who would father and mentor my beloved children when I was gone? What would happen to Rinat and Shira? Why should my parents bury their son? It hardly seemed fair and just.

After the anger wore off, I started to try to understand why I'd gotten sick. Perhaps, if I had been a better Jew I would not have gotten sick? Maybe I should have been more sensitive to my patients? Maybe I should have been nicer to people? (etc.)

Two weeks after the surgery, I was in a depressed state of mind and had trouble sleeping. I was having morbid thoughts about my prognosis and was worried about the effects of my illness on my family. One night, at around 2 a.m., I was doing research on sarcoma online. I would be seeing an oncologist soon and wanted to know my treatment options. Unfortunately, most of what I read was depressing. None of the standard chemotherapy regimens seemed to be effective against sarcoma. My specific subtype of sarcoma was extremely rare and had very little information known about it. Then I came across a very recent study that was done on sarcoma.

CHEMOTHERAPY

The study compared the use of an old drug called doxorubicin together with a new drug called olaratumab, versus using just doxorubicin alone. The study was specific to very sick patients with metastatic disease, who were also not candidates for surgery or radiation. The results showed that the group of patients that received both drugs lived twenty-six months whereas the group that only got the old drug alone lived twelve months. There was a significant survival benefit with the use of the old and new drug together. The FDA fast-tracked olaratumab and approved it for use in patients with metastatic sarcoma.

Fortunately, my situation was different. I had sarcoma that was surgically removed and my cat scan after surgery was clean of cancer. Clean of cancer does not mean free of any cancer. It takes a hundred million cancer cells to form a mass that can be seen on a CAT scan. The question was: Do I have any cancer cells left within me? No one could answer this question. My options were to do nothing and hope that the cancer never returns, or to take chemotherapy and hope that it kills any remaining cancer cells. This was a question I would have to discuss with

my oncologist. Another question was, if olaratumab had such benefit in patients with metastatic disease, would it perhaps play a role in prevention of the recurrence of sarcoma? This idea had not been tested yet and there was no data available.

I called Mrs. Landau from Refuah Helpline and asked her to help me get appointments with the best sarcoma experts in the area. She made me three appointments for me: 1) Dr. Gary Schwartz at Columbia Presbyterian hospital, 2) Dr. William Tap at Memorial Sloan Kettering, and 3) Dr. Robert Maki at Lenox Hill hospital.

Three weeks after surgery I went to see the oncologist. I was very anxious, and it reminded me of the time that I had gone with my mother to her first oncologist appointment. I went to see Dr. Gary Schwartz in Columbia. He was considered the leading expert on sarcoma in the New York area. Rinat and Mrs. Landau from Refuah Helpline also came with me and I was glad to not be alone.

After waiting patiently, Dr. Schwartz came into the exam room. He was a man in his early sixties and he made a positive first impression on me. He asked me questions in a very empathetic and sincere way. I could tell he was a caring human being. After examining me, he spoke about my treatment options. He recommended preventive chemotherapy. Dr. Schwartz told me that he felt I had a ninety percent chance of recurrence without treatment, G-d forbid. With treatment, he felt that the risk could be lowered. He then recommended the standard treatment with doxorubicin and ifosfamide. This very difficult regimen has many side effects.

I then asked Dr. Schwartz if he was aware of olaratumab study. He answered me that he had “DESIGNED and INVENTED the drug,” and that it was his lab that had published the study. He was THE man on planet earth whom I needed to talk to and get an answer to



Dr. Gary K. Schwartz

my question. I asked Dr. Schwartz if olaratumab could be used for prevention of recurrence. He told me that in approximately a year he would be running a study to test this very idea, but the results would not be ready for three years. I told Dr. Schwartz that I want to be alive in three years. I did not want to wait until the study started. Even if I did wait, there was no guarantee that I would get the drug. It was possible that I would be placed in the group of patients who got the standard treatment. That is how medical studies are run.

I asked Dr. Schwartz if I could be treated with olaratumab and doxorubicin off study. He agreed and told me that I would be the first patient in the world to take this regimen as preventive treatment. He had not recommended this treatment initially because it is not considered standard of care.⁵² He had only considered this protocol once I had asked my question.

⁵² Standard of care: a medical and legal term for the usual and accepted kind of medical care for a specific medical condition or set of medical conditions; the way in which similar qualified practitioners would have managed the patient’s care under similar or identical circumstances.

I then went to see Dr. Maki and Dr. Tap for second and third opinions. They both recommended the standard treatment. I asked them what they thought about using olaratumab in my situation. They both said that it was an interesting idea, but it was not considered the standard of care at this time. Once I told them that Dr. Schwartz had agreed to administer this regimen to me, they both smiled and then concurred. They had both been taught by and worked for Dr. Schwartz earlier in their careers. It was obvious from their reactions that they both respected and admired their former boss.

I believe and feel that the abovementioned sequence of events was Divine providence. It made my choice to take this chemotherapy regimen clear. Just to clarify: my faith is in G-d and not in Dr. Schwartz, olaratumab, or Columbia University Medical Center. I do believe that G-d appoints his emissaries to help heal people. I pray that Dr. Schwartz will be the right *shliach* from G-d to help me stay healthy.

Six weeks after my surgery, I started taking chemotherapy. The process was complex and emotionally challenging. After registering in the infusion center, I had to wait to get blood work. I then had to wait to see Dr. Schwartz. I then had to wait for the blood work results. I then had to wait for the nurse to review the blood work and clear me to start the treatment. I then had to wait for a room to become available. I then had to wait for the medicine to be sent up from the pharmacy. Only then could the treatment begin. It took around two hours for

the medicine to be administered intravenously. There was a lot of waiting.

While sitting at the infusion center, I observed the other patients also waiting for their treatments. The patients were all at different stages of their disease process. Some looked healthy, and others looked close to death. Sitting in a cancer infusion center makes people very aware of their own mortality.

Many of the other patients were observant Jews. One patient that left an impression on me was a Chassidic woman in her late fifties. She was a mother of ten children and was always there with her husband. She looked very sick and appeared to be in a lot of pain. I was impressed and emotionally moved to see how her husband cared for her. Then one day she stopped coming.

I was speaking to Rabbi Schonbuch about my feelings regarding everything that I had recently been through. He sent me a book by Dr. Bernie Siegel called *Love, Medicine, and Miracles*.⁵³ Dr. Siegel was a retired cancer surgeon from Yale University with over fifty years' experience. His book really helped me with the last stage of the grieving process, acceptance.

Dr. Siegel explained that he had witnessed many patients overcome the statistics of their diagnosis. He noted that most of these patients had positive attitudes and used their illness

⁵³ Bernie S. Siegel, M.D., *Love, Medicine, and Miracles: Lessons Learned About Self-Healing from a Surgeon's Experience with Exceptional Patients* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1986).

as an impetus for spiritual and emotional growth. As Viktor Frankl would say, they found meaning in their suffering.⁵⁴

Dr. Siegel's book helped me change my attitude toward my illness and treatment. It also reminded me of important life lessons that I had learned in the past but forgotten over the years. For example, after the incident I mentioned earlier, of witnessing a young child die from being crushed by a truck, I became obsessed with the well-being and safety of my own kids. What helped me overcome this pathological worry was the realization that G-d loves my children more than I love them. My worry had been rooted in lack of faith and a delusion that I can control everything. The first step in healing was to let go of worrying about things that I cannot control.

Happy birthday to you, my reader. You may be thinking that I have just lost my mind, but I am trying to illustrate a point. Every nanosecond of existence and life is an act of recreation by G-d. In other words, in addition to being born some number of years ago, you are being RE-created all the time. Your continued existence is evidence and proof that G-d wills that you exist.

54. The approach of healing through finding meaning in suffering was presented in Frankl's bestselling classic *Man's Search for Meaning* (originally published in 1946 in German, as *Trotzdem Ja Zum Leben Sagen: Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager*, meaning *Nevertheless, Say "Yes" to Life: A Psychologist Experiences the Concentration Camp*), considered revolutionary and, therefore, harshly critiqued at the time. Viktor Frankl, M.D.—a Jewish Austrian psychiatrist, neurologist, and Holocaust survivor—ultimately founded logotherapy (existential analysis), now highly respected as the “third Viennese School of Psychotherapy” (the first and second being the approaches of Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler).

So, happy birthday.

No one knows how long he or she is going to live. The length of my life is out of my control. To worry about dying is a sign of a lack of faith and is foolish. Everyone dies eventually. What I should worry about is how I choose to live and use the precious time that G-d grants

me out of His love for me. Instead of worrying about what will happen to my children after I die, I should worry about the amount and quality of time that I spend with them WHILE I am alive. G-d loves my children more than I love my children. What He decides for me will be the best for them as well.

Letting go of worry and accepting G-d's will for me has had profound ramifications in my attitude toward chemotherapy, my illness, and my life in general. Instead of viewing the medicine as a poison that kills the bad and the good, I view



Shira, and a bald eagle



Ephraim, Miami 2018



Rabbi Gafne, Tzfat,
Israel 2018



Yitzy,
Monsey 2018

it as life-sustaining Divine energy that provides hope for continued health. Instead of viewing my hair and beard loss as a negative side effect, I perceive it as proof that chemotherapy is working. In other words, a positive and hopeful attitude is a worthy goal to strive for when faced with adversity. As the holy Tzemach Tzedek⁵⁵ teaches, “Think good and it will be good.”

⁵⁵ Tzemach Tzedek (lit., “righteous scion”): The term used to refer to the writer of the book of responsa (rabbinic answers to questions or problems) with the same name, the third Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel (Schneerson) of Lubavitch, 1789–1866 (not to be confused with the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson).

INNER PEACE

I thank G-d for giving me cancer. To explain this statement, I want to mention what Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn said after being in prison, “I would never want to go to prison, but the fruits of being there I would never give up.” I would never want to have cancer, open-heart surgery, lose a lung, experience a ridiculous amount of pain, or take chemotherapy. However, I would never give up the life lessons, emotional growth, and spiritual growth that I have gotten from getting cancer. I am happier now than I have ever been in my life. I enjoy the moment and thank G-d for every breath.

Inner peace has been elusive my whole life. I have made many wrong detours and mistakes in trying to find inner happiness. Surprisingly, my illness has led me to a certain soulful tranquility that I have been searching for, for as long as I can remember. I have chosen to let go of anger, forgive, and ask for forgiveness.

A successful life is defined by the degree of positive emotional and spiritual growth. Everyone is tested and challenged during

their life. All new stages and experiences in life are initially faced with apprehension. How we navigate these turbulent waters determines and defines us as people. The universal solution to happiness is surprisingly simple when you finally find it. Let go of what you cannot control, place your faith in G-d for everything, and use your time and energy efficiently. “Efficiently” means to make sure that your thoughts, speech, and action are in line with G-d’s will. Look honestly inward into your soul, identify your own personality flaws, and fix them. It is more difficult to fix an internal demon than it is to win an external war.

My life up to this point has been very colorful and filled with many difficult challenges and dramatic events. In retrospect, this turbulence has been a priceless gift from G-d. My challenges have led me on a path of **Wisdom, Knowledge, and Understanding**. I have grown and hope to continue to grow emotionally and spiritually. He has been patient for me to discover Him. I have come to have an intimate and deep relationship with G-d. He was always with me, He is with me now, and He will always be with me. Where my life will take me from this point is unknown. What is known is that wherever I do go, it will be an opportunity to get closer to G-d. This is the evolving story of my metamorphosis.

**JUST THE
BEGINNING**

NOT

**THE
END**

THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS



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LIFE AND DEATH

Initially, G-d created the world without death and the first couple was supposed to live forever. They were placed in the Garden of Eden and were told that they may partake of everything except for that which comes from The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad. They were cautioned that if they were to eat from this tree, they would surely die. The implication is that Good and Evil existed **before** the primordial sin since there was a **Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad**. Good and Bad were clearly separate and easily discernable from each other. This was Good, and that was Bad. It was clear and obvious, without ambiguity. In addition, evil existed outside of the first couple and did not have an intrinsic hold over them.

After the primordial sin, when the first couple partook from the forbidden tree, there was a cataclysmic and fundamental change in the fabric of existence. Good and bad became mixed up and it was no longer easily discernable what was good and what was evil. Furthermore, bad and evil entered the soul and maintain an intrinsic hold over man to this day.

In response to the primordial sin, G-d responded by expelling Adam and Chavah from the Garden of Eden. His rationale was simple: if they were to remain in the Garden, they might also come to partake from the **Tree of Life** and regain immortality.

The obvious question is: Why was G-d concerned that they may live forever? Let them repent and return the world and themselves to the pre-sin state. The answer is that since good and bad are mixed up and have an internal hold over man, eating from the Tree of Life would result in bad and evil living forever.

Because of their sin's fundamental change to existence, G-d expelled the first couple from the Garden and condemned them to death. The purpose of death is to ensure that bad and evil do not exist forever.

G-d punished Adam with the need to "labor the earth and produce bread." This work was designed to purify the world. For this purpose, G-d eventually gave the Torah to the Jewish people. The Torah serves to clearly delineate good and evil. When a Jew "works" by observing the Torah's commandments, he or she separates the good from the bad. Every mitzvah restores the world to the pre-sin state.

Through the cumulative efforts of the Jewish people for thousands of years, good and bad will be separated from each other and the evil within the soul of man will be expelled. This will usher in a new era of existence. Because of the restoration of clarity, G-d will remove the "spirit of impurity from the world." This will eliminate the purpose and need for death, as the prophet states, "Death will be swallowed up forever." Every mitzvah that we properly observe brings the end of death closer.

DWELLING PLACE IN THE LOWER WORLDS

According to Jewish tradition and Chassidic thought, “The purpose of Creation is that G-d desires a Dwelling Place in the Lower Worlds.” The implication is that there exist many worlds.

According to kabbalah, G-d created many worlds in the process of bringing about our physical state of being. The entire known and unknown physical universe or multiverse is considered the lowest “World of Action,” or *olam asiyah* in Hebrew. All that can now or will ever be seen or measured, including Dark Matter and Dark Energy, is included in the world of *asiyah*.

Beyond this lowest physical world exist other spiritual states of being. These other worlds are referred to as the Worlds of Formation (*yetzirah*), Creation (*beriah*), and Emanation (*atzilut*). These other worlds exist in “spiritual space” and cannot be measured or perceived in the traditional scientific sense.

These three spiritual worlds are differentiated by the degree of revelation or concealment of Divinity, also referred to as “G-d’s light.” In the lower worlds, Divinity is less revealed or more concealed. Conversely, in the higher worlds, Divinity is more revealed or less concealed. To perceive and experience

these other spiritual worlds, a person must possess the proper receptors or antenna. By way of example, the physical world possesses energy in the form of the electromagnetic (EM) spectrum. This includes visible light and other forms of energy that are invisible to the naked eye. These various forms of EM energy are all differentiated by their wavelengths and include X-rays, ultraviolet light, infrared light, microwaves, and radio waves. To perceive any of these various forms of physical energy, a person must possess the appropriate receptor or antenna. The eye's retina possesses receptors that can absorb and perceive light waves. To perceive the other forms of EM energy, the proper receptor is required. For example, to capture radio waves a specific type of antenna is required.

To perceive the higher worlds, a spiritual antenna is required. It is unnecessary to physically travel to any specific location, since the spiritual worlds are always everywhere. A spiritual antenna is formed by learning the Torah, proper observance of Divine commandments (*mitzvos*), and character refinement.

However, the purpose of Creation is not the selfish perception and experience of spiritual phenomenon. Rather, it is a person's responsibility to understand and actualize G-d's motives for Creation.

When our Holy Temple existed in Jerusalem, the Essence of G-d was revealed to the Kohen HaGadol (High Priest), in the part of the Temple called the Holy of Holies, on Yom Kippur; to one person, in one place and at one time. This rather narrow

experience demonstrated that spirituality and physicality can morph into one entity. Through the cumulative efforts of all G-d's servants throughout the millennia, the physical world is refined and becomes a vessel for the absorption of Divinity. The ultimate culmination will be when every person will perceive the essence of G-d, everywhere and all the time. This is referred to as a "dwelling place in the lower realms." G-d's reasons for wanting a dwelling place in this world are His alone. We can postulate that when a person uses free will to turn away from bad and do good, this is pleasure to G-d. As is stated in *sefer Tanya*, G-d has pleasure when darkness is transformed to light.

REPENTANCE

G-d is perfect. Man is not. All human beings make mistakes. For existence to continue, G-d creates a mechanism that allows for tolerance of man's imperfections. When a mistake is made, the entire system does not fail. Rather, G-d's Divine presence is withdrawn, in proportion to the mistake. This withdrawal is the mechanism that imparts to the system flexibility and continued existence. More importantly, it allows for the correction of the mistake and return of the Divine Presence.

The main element of correcting a mistake is the resolution not to repeat the error again. This willful decision is the beginning of the reconciliation between G-d and man. It also allows for the restoration of the Divine Presence in the world.

When Creation is functioning properly, then G-d's tetragrammaton name יהוה is complete and whole. This represents a plentiful and uninterrupted flow of Divine energy into the world. Man's sins cause a fragmentation in G-d's name. The last letter ה is cleaved from the first three letters יהו of G-d's name. This represents an obstruction and interruption of Divine energy into the world.

The Hebrew word for return or repentance, is *teshuvah*, תשובה. It can be read as "ה תשוב" the "hey". Return the letter hey. In other words, repentance leads to the reunification of G-d's ineffable name יהוה.

This represents the restoration of Divine flow in the world. This Divine mechanism of fragmentation and reunification allows for stability and the continued existence of Creation.

DIVINE PROVIDENCE AND MIRACLES

Nature is defined by parameters of time and space referred to as the time-space continuum and includes the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology. Nature is created by one aspect of Divine energy. This energy represents G-d's ability to reveal Himself in a finite way.

When supranatural miracles occur, such as the splitting of the sea or the way we left Egypt, it represents the revelation of G-d's infinite energy. The infinite quality of these miracles breaks the finite laws of nature.

However, the **Essence of G-d** transcends both the finite and the infinite. G-d cannot be defined by anything including being called infinite or spiritual. It is from G-d's essence that the infinite, finite, spiritual, and physical are emanated. Nevertheless, G-d's essence remains formless and undefinable.

The essence of G-d has the capacity to unify diametric opposites since He transcends both. If G-d wants, he can fuse the infinite and finite in a way that the finite becomes a vessel for the revelation of the infinite. This is manifest in miracles that are revealed in and through nature.

This book is filled with stories that superficially seem natural. But, if a person contemplates the sequence of the

details of each story, it becomes evident that a Divine force was clearly at play. These miracles are revealed through nature and represent the revelation of the essence of G-d and His providence.

PURIM

G-d's name is not mentioned in *Megillat Esther* (the Book of Esther; "the *megillah*," read on Purim). Superficially, the story of Esther seems to evolve naturally without any mention of miracles. Nevertheless, Purim is considered miraculous. However, the miracles of Purim are revealed through nature. This represents the fusion of infinity (miracles) with the finitude (nature). The fusion of diametric opposites requires a force greater than both. Nature is governed by G-d's finite energy. Typical miracles, such as the splitting of the seas, represent G-d's infinite energy. However, the **Essence of G-d** transcends both the infinite and finite. It is within the capacity of G-d's formless essence to fuse and reveal miracles **through** nature. Purim represents the revelation of G-d's essence.

Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer teaches that before G-d created the world, all that existed was G-d and His name. The name referred to is the tetragrammaton, יהוה. This name represents the emanated infinite energy **after** G-d decided to create the world. יהוה consists of letters which represent form. This emanated energy of G-d is also defined by ethereal form, being infinite. Form can represent form.

However, **before** G-d decided to create, there was only G-d. G-d has no form. Therefore, any name that is limited by form cannot refer to the essence of G-d. The early kabbalistic *sefer* (book), *Ginuz Eguz*, teaches that the name of G-d **before** he

decided to create the world is יהוה **without** the letters יהוה. This formless name lacks letters and is thus more fitting to refer to the formless essence of G-d.

We learn that in the future, all Jewish holidays will be nullified except Purim. We also refer to the holiest day of the year as Yom HaKippurim, which may be translated as “the day like Purim.” The implication is that Purim is more holy than Yom HaKippurim. As mentioned earlier, Purim represents the revelation of G-d’s essence. The name that represents G-d’s essence lacks letters. That is why G-d’s name is not mentioned in *Megillat Esther*.

WISDOM, UNDERSTANDING, AND KNOWLEDGE

One of the central ideas in classical Chassidic philosophy is the power of the mind to rule over the heart. When a person is born, his or her heart is filled with raw, untamed and unrefined emotions. As the person's mind matures, it develops the capacity to modulate and tame the raw emotions of the heart.

The mind contains within it three unique intellectual powers. They are referred to as Wisdom (*chochmah*), Understanding (*binah*), and Knowledge (*daat*). These three words in Hebrew combine to form the acronym **Chabad**.

Wisdom or *chochmah* is a specific intellectual power that refers to the essence or seminal point of an idea. It is the bolt of lightning when inspiration strikes. Contained within this seed of an idea is all that will be revealed in the future. However, it is contracted and concealed in its initial emanated state.

This *chochmah* that has entered the consciousness of the individual is derived from powers much greater than the finite person himself. All Wisdom is G-d's. As Proverbs 3:19-20 states, "G-d founded the earth with Wisdom; established the

heavens with Understanding. With His Knowledge the depths were split, and the heavens drip dew.” Wisdom exists outside and is independent of the individual. Only if a person merits, will Wisdom flow from G-d’s infinite reservoir of *chochmah* to that person. Humility is the key attribute to merit the flow of Wisdom from the heavens.

Understanding or *binah* is the second unique power of the intellect. *Binah* absorbs within itself the contracted seed of *chochmah* and develops it. Understanding gives Wisdom dimensions of depth and breadth. It develops the intellectual seed into something that has clearly defined parameters and details.

Chochmah and *binah* are referred to as “Two friends that never separate.” They are mutually codependent on each other to bring an idea from the potential state into tangible reality. These two powers reside exclusively in the mind and lack the ability to reach the heart.

The third unique intellectual power is called Knowledge or *daat*. *Daat* is the power of full integration and absorption of the idea into the essence of the soul. With *daat*, the idea is permanently engraved into your being and can no longer be discerned as something separate from the individual. *Daat* takes the efforts of *chochmah* and *binah* and connects the person with them in an unbreakable unity. *Daat* is the bridge that connects the intellect with emotions. *Daat* shares elements of the mind and heart.

As a person matures, his or her intellectual powers of Wisdom, Understanding, and Knowledge also develop. Only then can a person use the full power of the mind to modulate and control the heart. The heart needs guidance. It wants what it wants without delay and without regard for other mitigating factors. By having intellectual clarity and maturity, the mind can impart the necessary emotive guidance to allow the heart to look past its own self-serving needs and experience self-transcendence. As we pray daily, “You graciously bestow Knowledge upon man and teach mortals Understanding. Graciously bestow upon us from You, Wisdom, Understanding, and Knowledge. Blessed are you, Lord, who graciously bestows Knowledge.”

The target of Divine service is not the mind but the heart. We are commanded to “Love G-d with all your HEART.” The obvious question arises: How can we be commanded to love? Either you love or do not love. A person cannot be forced to feel for another being, Divine or earthly. The answer is simple: we can be commanded to **KNOW** G-d by using our three intellectual faculties of Wisdom, Understanding, and Knowledge. Once Divine ideas are firmly affixed and engraved in the mind, the path to emotional Divine experience on demand is wide open. A person can contemplate and meditate on Divinity and generate real emotional love and awe for G-d. This is known as the long-shorter way. This system of Divine service takes time and is considered difficult to attain and is

thus called the long way. But, once attained, it is possible to generate an intense emotional connection with G-d at will. Thus, it is also referred to as the shorter way.

TESTIMONIALS



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בנוהשי"ח

שנה טובה ומבורכת לכבוד יידי החשוב הרה"ח ואב ועלענקא הי"ו, רופא מוסחה
בגמרינו בעת כניסת שנה החדשה תשע"ט הבעל"ט חגנו רוצה להכיר הטובה
ולהביט תודתי על כל פעולותיך המופלאים שאחה פועל בחכמת הרפואה שחנן לך
הבודא שולט מחכמתו ובלב מבין לרפא ברזחיו, ובפרט לבני עמיט הציבור החרדי
שאחה שחרם בנאמנות יחידה ובמסירה תמידית בכלליות ובפרטיות.

וזה כמה שנים שאני מכיר אותך והרבה שמעתי ממך על התקופות וגלים הקשים
שעברו עליך במשך החיים ואיך נחקרבת לה' ולהורו, והגנו משגר לך מסיב
ברכותי שהקדוש ברוך הוא יתן לך ולמשפחתך שנה טובה ומתוקה ויה"ר שחובה
לאורך ימים ושנים טובות לעשות פעלים לתורה ויר"ש בבריאת השלימות
ובסייעתא דשמיא, ויהי לך כה עוד רבות בשנים להיות שליח נאמן מאת הקב"ה
להיות ולרפא הציבור הנצרכים להאומנת שבידיך ולהנסיון שברשותך, ותהא
במעשי ידיך הצלחת גדולה ושמירה עליונה מבלי יצא ח"ו מכשול מתחת ידיך.

המברך בידרות

אוריאל לייב
אבא רבא 23/11/1966

MOSHE ARON STEINBERG

22 Elul, 5778

I have been privileged to be the founder and director of Hatzolah of Kiryas Joel for over thirty years. During this time, I have been actively involved in emergency care and patient advocacy. In this capacity, I have interacted with thousands of physicians.

I first met Dr. Zelenko at a social function in June 2004. He was fresh out of residency and working in our community health center. I had heard of Dr. Zelenko's impeccable credentials and that he was a Chassidic Jew.

During that first encounter with Dr. Zelenko, I was made aware of a critically ill patient who needed to be transferred from an upstate hospital to a tertiary medical center in New York City. I asked Dr. Zelenko to come along with us and he somewhat nervously agreed. On the way to the hospital, he told me that this was his first time in an ambulance. I sensed that there was something unique and special about him. Little did I know that Dr. Zelenko would become one of my closest friends and my partner in saving hundreds of lives together, with G-d's help.

It is a difficult task to describe Dr. Zelenko in a short synopsis. However, I can attest to the sentiments of his thousands of patients and medical colleagues. He is widely respected and is considered one of the best family physicians that most people have ever known. He possesses broad medical knowledge and uncanny intuition, and most importantly, he acknowledges that everything is from G-d. I have never seen such a combination of character traits and skills in one person. I have been privileged to learn much from his exceptional spiritual, medical, and psychological insight.

He also possesses an extremely generous nature and frequently provides his services to the poor without financial reimbursement.

I was deeply moved after reading Dr. Zelenko's *Metamorphosis*. It is my feeling that this book will inspire Jewish souls for generations to come. I pray for Dr. Zelenko's complete recovery from his recent serious medical illness.

A kesivah vachasimah tovah and a simchas Yom Tov!!

Moshe Aron Steinberg
Kiryas Joel, N.Y.

YOEL WAGSCHAL, CPA

8/28/18

I just finished reading *Metamorphosis*, written by my best friend, Dr. Zev Zelenko, M.D., and I would like to share a few of my thoughts and feelings.

No one could predict that a routine visit to Dr. Zelenko would change my life. Unlike the typical doctor, Zev does not only examine the patient's body, he also speaks to and touches your soul. My friendship with Dr. Zev began after he diagnosed me with a common cold. I asked him, "Why do I get frequent viral infections?" Dr. Zelenko said "Let's sit down in my office and I will explain it to you." He made a joke and said it is because of "Avirus," which—in the Hungarian pronunciation of Yiddish—means *sins*. We sat down in his private office and he exposed me to *sefer Tanya* for the first time.

After that experience we agreed to learn Torah together in the morning. Afterward, through this learning we formed a deep and meaningful friendship. Dr. Zelenko told me that the most meaningful relationships are built upon unbreakable foundations. Learning Torah together is one way to build such a foundation, since the Torah is G-d's eternal wisdom. In retrospect, I have seen this come to fruition in many aspects of my life.

Dr. Zelenko's love of learning has surpassed all his other priorities. He would text me at random times and ask if I was available to learn. Dr. Zelenko was frequently woken up in the

middle of the night by Hatzolah to treat patients. Afterward, instead of going to sleep, he would text me to see if I was awake to learn with him. We learned Chassidic and kabbalistic wisdom together. This inner dimension to Torah was new to me and deeply inspired my soul and deepened my relationship with G-d. I am honored, grateful and humbled to have Dr. Zelenko in my life.



Yoel Wagschal, C.P.A.

I was in Eretz Yisrael with my wife and three boys for a family *simchah* when I learned of Zev's serious illness. I immediately arranged with my sons to spend the following day *davening* at *mekomos ha'kedoshim* (the gravesites of holy *tzaddikim*—saintly individuals) and begging Hashem to give Zev ben Leah a speedy and full recovery. Upon returning home I went to visit him in the hospital, and I was relieved to see that Hashem had answered everyone's prayers. Dr. Zelenko was alive and out of immediate danger. I am inspired to see how Dr. Zelenko conducts himself while he is recovering and on chemotherapy. Instead of getting depressed and angry, Zev has "*metamorphized*" his pain and illness into something extremely positive by writing this book. This book will inspire many people and serve as a *zechus* (merit) for him and his family. My dear friend, I pray for your complete recovery, and may you live to experience the coming of Mashiach.

Your Friend,

Yoel Wagschal

Blooming Grove, New York

DOV MARKOWITZ, P.A.

8/24/18

I have known Dr. Zelenko for the past 16 years. I knew him first as a patient and then as a student, colleague and employee. In every role I knew him there was a common denominator about him, namely his respect and love for other human beings.

The Talmud in Shabbos 31a tells us a story about a man who wanted to convert to Judaism on the condition that he should learn the entire Torah while standing on one foot. He approached the great Rabbi Shammai, who chased him away for his lack of seriousness about the Torah. He then approached Rabbi Hillel, who paraphrased to him a verse in the Torah, “And you should love your fellow as yourself; I am Hashem,” and said to him that this is the entire Torah; the rest is an explanation, [and] now go and learn it.

Dr. Zelenko has employed this love for his fellow man in all aspects of his relationships. I have seen the countless hours of his uncompensated medical care for patients, his countless hours spent comforting patients, countless hours teaching and learning with other people, countless hours spent with at-risk youth, and the list goes on.

Personally, as I became a P.A. (Physician Assistant) student, Dr. Zelenko was there as a mentor. The greatest challenge for a new medical practitioner after graduation is the transition

from a controlled environment—surrounded by preceptors, professors, and other students—to an environment of independence and responsibility. Dr. Zelenko has been my mentor in the years since. When he offered me a job, all his previous employees and students told me that he is the best teacher.

Dr. Zelenko's education, intellect, knowledge, and experience is apparent to everyone who interacts with him, yet Dr. Zelenko treats each person with respect and dignity regardless of title, rank, or class, something that is not easy to find in the professions. This is what makes Dr. Zelenko the best employer, colleague, teacher, friend, and doctor.

Your Friend,
Dov Markowitz, P.A.—C
Kiryas Joel, New York

REFUAH HELPLINE

Mrs. Hanna Landau, Director

8/28/18

Dear Dr. Zelenko:

As the director of medical referrals for Refuah Helpline, I have met many doctors over the years. I have seen fabulous diagnosticians and innovative thinkers. I have met creative researchers and exceptionally talented surgeons. I have been awed, impressed, and overwhelmed by their sheer brilliance. These doctors are truly in a league of their own and I am humbled to have met them. Then there is Dr. Zelenko. You embody all the above and more.

I grew up in an age of community and family doctors. They knew each child's name, personality and medical history. Furthermore, they seemed to understand the psychosocial dynamics in their patient's lives and would intuit the root causes behind the symptoms. A diagnosis was a combination of medical acumen and a sixth sense honed by intimately knowing patient lives. The family doctor who carried an attaché case and made house calls is a relic of the old days. In today's world, the practice of medicine takes place in fancy buildings and impersonal clinics. Nowadays, doctors see more patients in less time. This has resulted in a fundamental

change in the doctor-patient relationship. The caring and compassionate **family** doctor is gone.

Dr. Zelenko, you represent a rare blend of the old-time family doctor coupled together with today's medical sophistication. With broad medical knowledge, keen intuition, and unusual devotion, you have risen to a category of your own. You are a family member to your patients. Your availability and commitment to your patients, medical skill, and willingness to take ownership of your patients' needs are universally recognized. Your name has traveled well beyond the geographical confines of Monroe, and you are highly respected by leaders in the medical field.

I can testify from my personal and professional experience, that you have always made yourself available regardless of time and a patient's ability to pay. Your drive and passion to relieve human suffering, together with an unusually broad skill set, have propelled you to the top of your profession.

I have sought your counsel countless times over the years. Your advice contains a blend of unusually strong medical knowledge together with your spirituality. Your faith in G-d permeates your practice of medicine. I believe this the key to Divine help and is probably the force behind your medical intuition. Your patients are truly fortunate to have you as their doctor.

Times have changed, and medicine has evolved. But you have found a way to blend today's medical wonders and

maintain yesterday's humanity. Dr. Zelenko, I applaud you as an amazing human being, doctor, advocate for the less fortunate, and above all as a *mentsh*. It is a true honor and rare privilege to know you.

May G-d help you have a complete recovery from your personal medical challenges. We eagerly await your full-time return to medical practice. My family and the community depend on and miss you.

Respectfully,
Mrs. Hanna Landau
Director of Refuah Helpline
Kiryas Joel, New York

DR. MICHEL KLEIN, PH.D.

8/22/18

Dr. Zev Zelenko has made a tremendous impact in my life. I was raised in a traditional but nonobservant Jewish home in Middletown, New York. I became connected with Chabad during my undergraduate years in Ithaca College and spent a year learning in *yeshivah* after graduating. Once that year was finished, I came back to Middletown, to live with my parents and to work for my father. I tried to preserve the inspiration and lifestyle that I'd had in *yeshivah* by *davening* and spending time in Kiryas Joel, but I struggled with *Yiddishkeit* considerably and became very depressed. It is at that time in my life that, thankfully, I met Zev.

While, I was *davening* at the main *shul* in Kiryas Joel, I met someone who told me about Dr. Zelenko. From the very first time I entered his Beis Medrash, I felt an instant connection with him. His unique blend and balance of *Yiddishkeit*, work life, and family life represented an ideal that I wanted to attain. We started learning *Chassidus* every morning at 5:30 a.m. While learning, I felt an instant connection with Zev. I respected his commitment to serious Torah learning, *halachah*, Talmud, and deep *Chassidus*. The more I got to know him, the more I was amazed at how he was able

to balance *Yiddishkeit*, family life, communal service, and practicing medicine. Through Zev, I became very close with some amazing Satmar *Chassidim*. Zev would frequently quote the *Zohar*, “There’s One Torah, One G-d, One Jewish People, and they’re all One.” My experience with Zev, his *shul*, and the Satmar community brought this teaching to life.

I spent a lot of time with his beautiful and holy family. I was deeply affected by Shabbos at his home and I wanted this for my future family. I saw how he used a custom-tailored approach to each of his children, imbuing them with warmth and love. When his son, Menachem Mendel, was born, I developed a very strong bond with him. This feeling would serve as a precursor to the love I would later feel for my children. While I may now live in Los Angeles with my family, I always try to see his family whenever I come to visit the East Coast.

Zev guided me through many milestones in my life as a Lubavitcher. He helped me navigate the emotional *shidduch* process, he bought me my first black hat (it was not cheap!), he helped me write a letter to the Rebbe through *Igros Kodesh* for the first time, and he bought me my first pair of Rabbeinu Tams *tefillin* along with beautiful custom leather *tefillin* bags with my Hebrew initials etched in them. When it was discovered that my Rashi *tefillin*, the pair that I had been using since I had first started consistently wrapping *tefillin*, were severely posul, he pooled together funds from the Satmar *Chassidim* in his

Beis Medrash to buy me a new pair (although I have a sneaking suspicion that he bought me that pair too).

Zev is there for me whenever I need him. Whether I needed a friend, a mentor, or a role model, he has always been available to listen intently and to provide me with thoughtful and thought-provoking responses. Whether it is a personal, spiritual, or family issue, he always tries his best to remedy the situation. This could not come from any other place besides a genuine love and concern for me. I remember that on the day I got married, Zev quietly made his way to the *chuppah*, where he held one of the four poles upon which the *chuppah* rested. As I was focusing in on the holiness of that special day, our eyes locked intensely, and I felt as if he was pouring into me all the *kavanos* and *chayus* that I needed. The *chuppah* represents the home that the husband and wife will build together; the fact that Zev was holding one of those poles was by no means an accident. There is not a day that goes by in my home that I do not do something or think of something that was directly affected by Zev. Thank G-d, I am now a husband, father of two beautiful children, a full-time K-8 music teacher, and have a Ph.D. in music composition from UCLA. The energy that Zev poured into me serves as a guiding force to imbue my family's life with *Yiddishkeit* and Chassidic values.

After I broke the glass at my *chuppah*, Zev told me that he loved me and embraced me with immense warmth and affection; I can still feel that warmth today. When Zev gave me my Rabbeinu Tams *tefillin*, he told me that the way I could repay him would be

to “pay it forward.” I can only hope that one day I will have the *zechus* to imbue the same warmth and to impact someone else’s life in the same way that Zev has impacted mine. I wouldn’t be who I am today were it not for him. Zev, thank you.

With much love,

Michel Klein

Los Angeles, California

YOEL RUBIN

8/20/2018

My name is Yoel Rubin and I am a longtime friend of Dr. Zev Zelenko. I am very emotionally and spiritually connected to Dr. Zelenko. After sharing with me his autobiographical book *Metamorphosis*, I wanted to share my memories and personal experiences with Dr Zelenko.

I will never forget that day, approximately twelve years ago, when Reb Moshe Aron Steinberg, founder of Hatzolah of Kiryas Joel, introduced me to Dr. Zelenko. He asked me if I could drive his children to Monsey, where they were attending school. I did not know at the time that this opportunity would change my life forever. As I got closer to Dr. Zelenko, I was able to observe the unconditional *ahavas Yisrael* he has for every Jewish soul.

A short time after I started to drive his children, Dr. Zelenko asked me if I would like to learn with him every morning. I was excited and immediately said yes. But I had a question for him, “I see you having *chavrusas* every morning: How will you find time for me?” He answered, “I will find time.”

After learning *Chassidus* with him for one week, my world view began to change. I started perceiving and feeling *Yiddishkeit* on a much higher level. I must point out that Dr. Zelenko is a man who had learned *aleph-beis* only fifteen years before.



We were able, BS”D⁵⁶, to finish the whole *Tanya* in depth and then start *Derech Mitzvosecha*, a very hard and kabbalistic *sefer*.

Before I continue I would like to thank you, Reb Zev, for helping me live life on a much more meaningful level and for helping me get to where I am now.

One Friday, I needed emergency surgery to remove kidney stones. I was in a great deal of unimaginable pain. I couldn’t be home by myself, being that I needed pain management, but I couldn’t stay in the hospital either. I called Dr. Zelenko for advice. With no hesitation, he said, “You and your entire family will be my guests for Shabbos.” That was a Shabbos to remember. Like a father rather than a doctor, he helped me keep my blood pressure down— which was dangerously high due to the pain. He kept on checking on me. That Shabbos at 5 a.m., I had a bad attack and I didn’t want to wake him up. I was outside of his house and suddenly, I saw that he was already sitting in his dining room and learning . . .

His love to another *Yid* and his dedication to Torah and *emunah* is a rarity.

Dr. Zelenko, my blessing to you is that you should always be able to shed light into people’s hearts and minds. Your journey from now on in life should only be happiness, and you and your wife and your precious children should have *harchavas hadaas*, and *siyata di’shmaya*, and *kol tuv*.

Your Friend,
Yoel Rubin
Kiryas Joel, New York

⁵⁶ BS”D: Be’siyata di’shmaya (with the help of heaven).

ANONYMOUS

8/29/18

I was privileged to get a copy of this incredible autobiography of my dear friend and mentor Dr. Zev Zelenko. As soon as Zev emailed it to me, I printed it out and read it for the next ten hours without interruption. As I went through the pages, I joyfully recalled the pleasurable good old days when I was blessed to learn with Zev.

Over a decade ago, as a young teenager, I was fortunate to be introduced to Dr. Zelenko. At this stage of my life, I was struggling with the typical problems of adolescence. During a routine well visit, Dr. Zelenko noticed something and asked me, “What’s bothering you?” I opened my heart to him. After the visit, we set a time for a weekly *shiur* of study in the holy *sefer Tanya*, of the Alter Rebbe, Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *zatza”l*.⁵⁷

Even today, I am amazed that an esteemed and busy doctor like Dr. Zelenko made time for me when I was a simple child. The only explanation is that Zev possesses an altruistic soul. He gives to his brethren without expectation of material or physical compensation, or other community recognition.

Our weekly *shiur* went on for several years. Zev used to come

⁵⁷ *zatza”l*: Acronym honorific, short for “*zecher tzaddik livrachah*”—may this saintly, righteous soul’s memory be for a blessing.

to my house every Friday, where we learned *Tanya*, *shmoozed*, ate the food that my mother prepared, and sang old warm Jewish songs, etc.

I remember one Friday: Zev got a call from a Hatzolah while we were learning. Even though I did not hear what was said on the other end of the line, it was obvious that it was bad news about a patient. I noticed that Zev was trying to hold back tears. I was stunned to see how deeply and personally the pain and suffering of another person affected Zev.

As I grew older, with my parents' encouragement, Zev used to take me out from time to time for a much-needed break. We went for dinner, during which he taught me some very important life skills that I still use today.

After I got married we started a new daily *chavrusa* in the early mornings. Initially we learned in the big *shul* in Kiryas Joel, but after Zev built his *shul*, Beis Medrash Shneur Zalman, we moved there. We had a great time learning the *Code of Jewish Law* and Talmud.

Besides learning Torah, Zev was and still is a great friend, with a warm heart that is willing to make room for everyone. He was always there for me with a listening ear and wise advice. He always greeted me with a genuine smile and obvious happiness.

Over the years, I realized that I was not the only one that Zev treated like this. He helped people that G-d sent into his life

without any expectation of reciprocity. Zev's life centers around selfless giving to others.

I want to finish with a few words directed toward the author of this book, my dearest Zev. Your life has been a total dedication to the people around you. You chose G-d over a secular life. Over the years, you have experienced joy as well as pain and difficult challenges. As I read about your divorce and recent illness, I felt your pain as if it was my own. However, I am filled with hope and it gives me great *chizuk* to see how you accept G-d's challenges, without resentment. Your life and book sanctify the name of our Creator.

I fervently pray to Hashem for you, and I have you in mind when I do *mitzvos* and good deeds. Hashem should bless you with a complete recovery! May you write many new chapters in your book about your happiness and prosperity with your wife, family, and friends.

I am reminded of a story of the holy Maggid from Chernobyl, who dedicated his life to liberate his brethren from terrible prisons. He was once himself imprisoned under severe circumstances and suffered greatly. One day, Rochel Imeinu⁵⁸ revealed herself and informed him that he would soon be freed. She also explained that the reason he was imprisoned was that he should have firsthand experience with the suffering of other people. His personal suffering was Divinely orchestrated to help *klal yisrael*.

⁵⁸ Rochel Imeinu: The biblical matriarch Rachel, wife of Jacob.

In my humble opinion, I think the same could be said of your situation. Even though we don't understand G-d's ways, we can speculate that your suffering is somehow designed to help the thousands of people who depend on you. I pray that you should completely recover, and we should merit to have our beloved doctor back.

ברכת כתיבה וחתימה טובה, תכלה שנה וקללותיה ותחל שנה
וברכותיה בעז"ה

Truly yours,

Anonymous

Kiryas Joel, New York

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Vladimir (Zev) Zelenko, M.D., is a board-certified family practitioner in Monroe and Monsey, New York. He is extremely popular and beloved by his patients. He has a truly unique and out-of-the-box approach to patient care. He focuses on each patient's physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs, and attempts to find integrative solutions that address all these important concerns.

Dr. Zelenko is married and has seven children. He lives in Englewood, New Jersey.

