

ב"ה

יהי אדונינו מודינו ורבינו  
מלך המשיח לעולם ועד

# תשורה

## משמחת הנשואין

של

לוי יצחק וסאשע  
גורקאוו

96

יום שני ב' ניסן  
יום ההסתלקות-הילולא דכ"ק אדמו"ר מוהרש"ב נ"ע  
הי' תהא שנת נפלאות דגולות  
שנת הצדי"ק בי"ת להולדת כ"ק אדמו"ר מלך המשיח שליט"א

Dear Family and Friends,

Thank you for joining us in our Simcha. May we always share each others happy occasions.

The following treatise is compiled from Sichos of the Rebbe Shlita MH"M which expound on the topic "The ultimate good of the era of the redemption - aspiring to a knowledge of G-d." It was originally published by Sichos In English and we thank them for permission to reprint it.

In addition we are excerpting a chapter from the ArtScroll History Series - "In the Shadow of the Kremlin" (translated from the best seller Hebrew version "Yahadus Hadmamah"). This highlights, in dramatic fashion, the piety and mesiras nefesh of the choson-kallah grandparents. It is our fervent hope that their illustrious conduct will serve as a shining example and inspiration to the young couple.

May Hashem fulfill our prayers for the complete and speedy recovery of the Rebbe Shlita MH"M, and may he lead us immediately to the ultimate redemption.

Rabbi Sholom Dov Ber and Leah Gurkov  
Rabbi Shmuel and Cherna Light

# THE ULTIMATE GOOD OF THE ERA OF THE REDEMPTION

## Aspiring to a Knowledge of G-d

### Two Windows to the Future

Concluding<sup>1</sup> his description of the Era of the Redemption in *Hilchos Melachim*, the *Rambam* writes:<sup>2</sup>

In that Era there will be neither famine nor war, neither envy nor competition, for good things will flow in abundance and all the delights will be as freely available as dust. The occupation of the entire world will be solely to know G-d.

This passage appears to echo a principle stated by the *Rambam* in *Hilchos Teshuvah*.<sup>3</sup>

The Torah has promised us that if we observe its [commandments] with joy... [G-d] will remove all the obstacles that prevent us from such observance, such as illness, war, hunger, and the like. Similarly, He will grant us all [types of] good things to reinforce our observance of the Torah...so that we will not spend our entire lifetime occupied in [securing] our bodily needs, but rather, will sit unburdened, and [thus have the opportunity to] grow wise through scholarship and to perform *mitzvos*.

The *Rambam's* intent in this passage of *Hilchos Teshuvah* is to explain the divine scales of reward and punishment. When a person observes the Torah and its *mitzvos*, G-d brings about circumstances that will provide him with material benefits so that he, in turn, will be able to expand and upgrade his observance. In the Era of the Redemption, therefore, when we will observe the Torah and its *mitzvos* in a consummate manner, we will be granted divine blessings in abundance.

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1. [The following text examines questions such as: the place of an idyllic depiction of the Messianic age in *Rambam's* strictly legal work; the bond between physical health and spiritual wellbeing; grading the various possible motivations for studying Torah; and the aspiration to "know G-d." This discussion is adapted from *hadranim* ("concluding discourses") on *Mishneh Torah* which the Rebbe *Shlita* delivered in the years 5735 [1975] and 5745 [1985]. These discourses were first published in their fully documented and annotated Hebrew editions as (a) *Hadran [5735] al...Sefer Mishneh Torah LehaRambam* (Kehot, N.Y.; 5750), and (b) *Likkutei Sichos...Hadran [5745] al Sefer Mishneh Torah LehaRambam* (Kehot, N.Y.; 5745). They have since reappeared, together with other studies in a series of *hadranim*, as components of *Kuntreis Shalmei Chagigah: Hadranim al HaRambam* (Kehot, Kfar Chabad; 5750).]
  2. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Melachim* 12:5.
  3. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Teshuvah* 9:1.

## Differences Between the Above Two Sources

Although in conception the two passages cited above are complementary, close analysis discovers several differences between the wording used in each: (a) When the *Rambam* describes in *Hilchos Teshuvah* how G-d will remove various impediments to our observance of the Torah, illness is listed as the first — and thus, the primary — hindrance, while in *Hilchos Melachim* it is not mentioned. (b) In *Hilchos Melachim* the *Rambam* writes that the world will be free of "envy and competition," while in *Hilchos Teshuvah* this subject is absent. (c) In *Hilchos Melachim* the *Rambam* mentions "delights", which he does not do in *Hilchos Teshuvah*.

In this connection, it is noteworthy that the use of a poetic phrase in *Hilchos Melachim* ("all the delights will be as freely available as dust") is not at all in character for the *Rambam* in the straightforward halachic context of *Mishneh Torah*.

## Halachah — The Medium by which the World is Refined

The above difficulties can be resolved by focusing on the *Rambam's* intent in composing the *Mishneh Torah*, and also on the fact that he chose to conclude the text with *Hilchos Melachim*, and in particular, with the coming of the *Mashiach*.

As he writes in his Introduction, the *Rambam* conceived of the *Mishneh Torah* as a work of *Halachah*, Torah law. What is the intent of *Halachah*? — To refine the world at large so that it will exist in harmony with G-d's will. There have been times during which this intent has been put into practice by Jewish kings. In the most complete sense, it will be realized in the Era of the Redemption, when the observance of all the *mitzvos* associated with the *Beis HaMikdash* will be restored and our people will devote all their energies to this goal.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the effect of the *mitzvos* in the world at large will be complete. There will be no pressures or disturbances hindering the observance of the Torah. Furthermore, "Knowledge, wisdom, and truth will be abundant,"<sup>5</sup> and an all-pervading atmosphere of perfection will encompass every element of existence.

This is the state described at the conclusion of *Hilchos Melachim*.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the passage from *Hilchos Teshuvah* originally cited describes a state in which the

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4. *Op. cit.*, *halachah* 2. [See the above essay on "The Function of *Mashiach*," where this theme is developed.]

5. *Hilchos Teshuvah*, *loc. cit.*; see also *Hilchos Melachim* 12:4.

6. Considering the above, we can understand why the *Rambam* chose to conclude the *Mishneh Torah* with a description of the Era of the Redemption rather than with a description of the World to Come.

The *Rambam* (in contrast to the *Ramban*, whose view is accepted in the teachings of *Chassidus*) considers the World to Come as the ultimate good and the most complete reward man will receive (see *Hilchos Teshuvah* 8:1-2, 9:2). Nevertheless, he conceives of the World to Come as the world of the souls, a spiritual realm where it will be impossible to observe the *mitzvos*. Therefore, as a conclusion to the *Mishneh Torah*, which is a text of *Halachah*, Torah law, he chooses to describe the Era of the Redemption, the age when the observance of Torah law and its effects in the world at large will reach their ultimate perfection.

Jewish people's observance and the effects of this observance on the world at large have not attained the perfection of the Era of the Redemption.

### **Perfect Observance will bring Perfect Health**

On this basis, we can begin to resolve the difficulties raised above. Firstly, there is no need to state that there will be no illness in the Era of the Redemption; this is self-evident.

In *Hilchos Deos*,<sup>7</sup> where the *Rambam* outlines a course of conduct designed to bring a person physical health, he promises:<sup>8</sup> "I guarantee that anyone who conducts himself in the ways which I have prescribed will never fall ill." In the Era of the Redemption, as part of the complete observance of the Torah and its *mitzvos*, people will follow these rules of health, so that illness will be unknown.

Since *Hilchos Teshuvah*, in contrast, describes a less perfect state, there is the possibility that a person will be motivated by his desires and fail to conduct himself according to the rules of health. Concerning such a state, therefore, it needs to be stated that G-d will "remove...illness" in order to enable a man to fully observe the Torah.

### **Erasing Envy**

In *Hilchos Melachim*,<sup>9</sup> the *Rambam* explains that there is a relationship of cause and effect between the removal of the obstacles and the generous flow of divine beneficence: "There will be neither famine (lit., 'hunger') nor war, neither envy nor competition, for good things will flow in abundance."

For this relationship to be effective, not only must a man receive divine blessings, but he must also be conscious of them. Otherwise, he may fall prey to "envy and competition." Furthermore, his envy might cause him to feel — albeit in an allegorical sense — "hunger", a craving desire for his colleague's possessions which might ultimately lead to conflict.

For this reason, the *Rambam* emphasizes that in the Era of the Redemption, "good things will flow in abundance and all the delights will be...freely available." The "good things" and the "delights" will be consciously appreciated by their recipients — for otherwise, these terms would be inappropriate. And because of the manifold nature of these blessings, "there will be neither famine nor war, neither envy nor competition."

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7. Ch. 4.

8. *Loc. cit.*, *halachah* 20.

9. This contrasts to *Hilchos Teshuvah*, where this relationship of cause and effect is not stressed. [In the *Hadran* of the year 5735 which serves as the source for this passage, the Rebbe *Shlita* addresses himself to the difference between the *Rambam's* statements in both places.]

## **Possessing Delights Without Being Possessed by Them**

Being involved in material delights in the Era of the Redemption is, however, somewhat problematic. At a time when humanity and the world at large will be refined and elevated to a state of perfection, it is difficult to conceive that a man would choose to invest his time in physical delights, matters that the *Rambam* describes<sup>10</sup> as "meaningless nonsense."

The *Rambam* resolves this difficulty by stating that the delights will be "as freely available as dust." Although they will be accessible to man — and he will partake of them for the sake of his health and physical welfare — he will consider them like "dust", i.e., as being utterly worthless.<sup>11</sup> Though we will live in an era of material prosperity, our attention will not be focused on it. Rather, "the occupation of the entire world will be solely to know G-d."

## **Imperfection in the Present Era**

In *Hilchos Teshuvah*, in contrast, the *Rambam* does not mention "delights". Since *Hilchos Teshuvah* describes a state in which man and the world at large are still in need of refinement, an individual may not have cultivated himself to the degree that he considers superfluous luxuries to be "as dust." On the contrary, there is the possibility that were he granted them, his involvement in physical pleasures would even hamper his observance of the Torah and its *mitzvos*. Therefore, although the *Rambam* emphasizes that a person will receive abundant divine blessings as a reward for past observance and as an encouragement for observance in the future, these blessings will not necessarily include "delights".

Moreover, since the delights will not be possessed by everyone, the possibility remains for "envy and competition," which could lead in turn to "famine and war." Nevertheless, the *Rambam* assures us, although these undesirable traits will exist in the world at large, G-d will prevent them from affecting those individuals who devote themselves to the observance of the Torah.

## **Perfection in the Study of the Torah**

As a result of the rich multitude of divine blessings in the Era of the Redemption, "the occupation of the entire world<sup>12</sup> will be solely to know G-d." This implies two concepts:

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10. *Hilchos Teshuvah* 8:6.

11. In *Hilchos Chametz U'Matzah* 2:2, the *Rambam* writes that when renouncing our ownership of any *chametz*, we should say that we consider it to be "like the dust of the earth," because dust has no value whatsoever.

12. From the expression "the entire world," and particularly from the contrast to the next clause of the *halachah* which specifies "the Jews," it appears that this phrase includes gentiles as well. Since, as the *Rambam* quotes in *halachah* 11:4, we will ultimately witness the fulfillment of the prophecy (*Zephaniah* 3:9), that "I will make the peoples pure of speech so that they will all call upon the Name of G-d," even non-Jews will be devoted solely to seeking "the knowledge of G-d."

(a) Because "good things will flow in abundance and all the delights will be...freely available," a man will not have to work for his livelihood. In the present era, in contrast, as the *Rambam* writes in *Hilchos Talmud Torah*:<sup>13</sup>

Anyone who decides that he should engage in the study of Torah without working and be supported by charity desecrates the Name of G-d.... It is most meritorious for a person to derive his livelihood from his own labor.

Although it is proper to "minimize one's business activity,"<sup>14</sup> the nature of our environment is such that we are all required to devote a certain amount of time to earning a livelihood. In the Era of the Redemption, in contrast, this will not be necessary and we will be able to direct all of our energies to the study of the Torah.

(b) More particularly, our energies will be directed to "the knowledge of G-d." At present, our study of the Torah has many different objectives, most obvious among them, a knowledge of how to perform the *mitzvos*. In the Era of the Redemption our study of the Torah will have a single goal,<sup>15</sup> the knowledge of G-d.<sup>16</sup>

In that Era we will still observe the *mitzvos*; indeed, it is then that our observance will attain perfection, as mentioned above. Nevertheless, since nothing will disturb our Torah study, we will be able to learn how to observe the *mitzvos* perfectly in a relatively short time. Thereafter, our attention will be devoted to the deeper dimensions of Torah study.

### **An Outpouring of Divine Knowledge**

As the *Rambam* continues:<sup>17</sup>

The Jews will therefore be great sages and know the hidden matters, and will attain an understanding of their Creator to the [full]<sup>18</sup> extent of mortal potential; as it is written,<sup>19</sup> "For the world will be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the waters cover the ocean bed."

By quoting this proof-text,<sup>20</sup> the *Rambam* highlights the manner in which the knowledge of G-d will permeate the world and the thought processes of every individual person. To understand the simile: The vast variety of creatures that live

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13. 3:10-11.

14. *Avos* 4:12; *Hilchos Talmud Torah* 3:8.

15. We see a parallel to this concept in the conclusion of *Hilchos Teshuvah*. There the *Rambam* speaks of an all-encompassing love for G-d that surpasses any other desire, even a desire for spiritual attainments such as securing for oneself a portion in the World to Come.

16. These two concepts are interrelated, because studying Torah for the sake of the "the knowledge of G-d" will lead a person to devote all of his energies to this goal and to seek no other occupation.

17. *Hilchos Melachim* 12:5.

18. This must be the *Rambam's* meaning, for otherwise he would be simply stating the obvious, namely, that the potential of mortals is limited.

19. *Yeshayahu* 11:9.

20. More particularly, the concept to be explained depends on the final words of the verse, "as the waters cover...." Significantly, when quoting this verse in *Hilchos Teshuvah* 9:2, the *Rambam* omits the conclusion of the verse. [See *Hadran*, 5735, for an explanation.]

on the dry land are readily discernible as separate entities. A vast multitude of creatures likewise inhabit the ocean. Nevertheless, when looking at the ocean, what we see is the ocean as a whole and not the particular entities which it contains.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, although in the Era of the Redemption the world will continue to exist, individual creatures will lose consciousness of their separate identity and will be suffused with the knowledge of G-d.

However, this state of being will not negate the world's existence. On the contrary, it will affirm the true existence of the world, for<sup>22</sup> "All the beings of the heavens, the earth, and whatever is between them came into existence solely from the truth of His Being."

### **Aspiring to a Knowledge of G-d**

In *Tanya*<sup>23</sup> it is explained that the future revelations of the Era of the Redemption are dependent on our divine service in the present time of exile. Since reward and punishment are structured according to the principle of<sup>24</sup> "measure for measure," our efforts to bring about the future revelation of a universal knowledge of G-d should resemble, albeit in microcosm, the state to be attained in that Era. Thus, to the fullest extent possible at present, our energies must be directed towards gaining a knowledge of G-d. And this endeavor will hasten the advent of the Era when that knowledge will permeate the entire world.

May this goal be realized in the immediate future.



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21 . Furthermore, in the context of the laws governing immersion in a *mikveh*, Tractate *Mikvaos* 6:7 cites the view of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel that a sea-creature is not considered to be an intervening substance between a person and the sea water. According to this opinion, not only do the creatures of the ocean appear to be of no account, but in truth their essential nature does not really differ from its own. This further reinforces the concept which follows in the text above.

22 . *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 1:1.

23 . Ch. 37.

24 . *Nedarim* 32a.



# The Story of Reb Yehoshua Pinson



MY LATE FATHER, R. Nachum Yitzchak Pinson, was born in Pahar, studied in the Tomchei Temimim Yeshivah in Lubavitch in 1904-05, and after his marriage settled in Staradub.

**The Era of the Kolkhoz** Whoever is at all familiar with the brief history of the Communist Revolution knows of "NEP" (the New Economic Policy), which was in force from 1921 to 1928. This policy was decided upon after the economic situation reached a critical state following the nationalization — i.e., the strangulation — of all private enterprise. Commercial activity came to a virtual standstill. Seeing that the fledgling regime was at the point of collapse, the authorities decided to resuscitate small-scale business, and at the same time allowed farmers to sell their produce on the open market. These measures achieved the desired effect, and for those few years commercial life blossomed afresh, and the economic situation in general improved considerably.

This period of prosperity lasted however for only about six years, for in 1928, when Stalin had finally established himself as the sole and supreme ruler of the entire USSR, he utterly cancelled every vestige of these liberal measures. The first to feel this drastic step in all its severity were, of course, the Jews, who now found themselves suddenly without any means of support. Moreover, since the crushing weight of taxation was increased at the same time, whatever profits they had made during the relatively prosperous years now vanished in the newly levied impositions. For many, the situation was now unbearable.

It was during this period that the system of collective farming based on the *kolkhoz* was first implemented. Vast masses of farmers and others living in rural regions were dispossessed of their lands and compulsorily transferred hundreds of kilometers distant from their former homes to work the farms of other peasants who in turn were likewise dispossessed. The newly grouped farmers worked their newly-apportioned lands collectively, and the profits of their labors were shared equally between them. In the early days of the system, Jews were allowed to refrain from working on *Shabbos*. After some time, however, not only was this privilege rescinded, but those who refused to desecrate the Sabbath lost their right to share in the profits. In my father's case, since he abstained from work every *Shabbos*, the payment for these days was deducted, and moreover he was fined. His situation was now well-nigh impossible.

So it was that in 1931 we moved to Kharkov, where we supported ourselves mainly from the sale of pins which we manufactured at home as state-employed workers. Throughout our first winter there my father never slept at home for fear of the authorities. Even though I was then quite young, I too did not sleep at home, because wearing a beard at my age was attracting too much unwelcome attention.

It was in this house in Kharkov that a secret meeting was held every year, at which a number of my father's close friends planned the collection of *maamad*, the voluntary tax that chassidim contribute toward the maintenance of the Rebbe's household. Thus it was that once a year our home was honored by a visit from the chassid responsible for this underground fund — R. Nissan Nemenov, who in later years was the the revered *mashpia* of the Lubavitcher Yeshivah in Brunoy until his passing in 1984. Another distinguished visitor to our home was R. Zalman Shimon Dvorkin, at the time the *rav* of Staradub, who became a *rav* in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, until he passed away in 1985.

IT WAS THE NIGHT after Purim, 1939, and for some reason this was the only night that my father slept at home. At one a.m. there was a sharp rap on the door. Our blood froze. We waited a moment in perfect silence until someone was able to direct his faltering footsteps to the door. The entrance was filled by two officers of

**Doorknock  
at  
Midnight**

the NKVD, who identified themselves at once, and ordered us not to budge. They then began to ransack the house, searching through every imaginable nook with painstaking thoroughness for hours on end. Their profane fingers did not spare even my father's cherished collection of sacred books, until with hawk's eyes they lighted upon half-a-dozen words that were handwritten on the flyleaf of one of them — nothing less than the Rebbe's exact address in Vienna! What more eloquent proof could they seek than what appeared to them as perfect evidence that their prey was a "Schneerson agent" and the Rebbe's chief overseas contact?

That was enough. My father was arrested and taken away.

DESPERATE FOR INFORMATION as to his whereabouts, we began scuttling the next morning from one office to the next, never being told whether we were following the right leads. Within a few days there was a new dilemma to grapple with. My sister and I were now summoned to NKVD headquarters. Should we report there, or flee? After hours of anguished debate we decided to report.

**Counter-Revolutionaries** My interview opened with a series of questions that were routine enough — my name, occupation, income, and so on — and appeared about to end. At this point I plucked up the daring to ask my interrogator whether he happened to know where my father was, and why he was arrested. In reply he directed me to one of his colleagues.

This official, I am afraid, was a fellow Jew. When I put my question to him he growled: "Dog that you are! Shut your mouth and don't ask me questions of that sort, you filthy counter-revolutionary! And if you happen to think that you're a Torah scholar, I'd like you to know that I'm a bigger one than you are. And I've got more of those books at home than you've got. Just don't say anything until I tell you to!"

Now in every factory or other place of work the authorities used to plant a *politruk*. This was an inspector whose task was to see to it that everything and everyone functioned exactly as intended to, and not otherwise. Great and small alike stood in dread of this omnipotent being, for the fate of the humblest factory hand and the most senior administrator was equally dependent on his discretion. In the case of the *politruk* at my place of work, experience had taught me that though he was fond of his job, he was even more fond of hard cash. I was thus able to take the liberty of asking him to investigate on my behalf. He told me that the Chief Prosecutor of the NKVD was a friend of his from their schooldays, and that he would have a word with him.

He was caught by surprise, however, when he called at the prosecutor's office a few days later, as requested, in order to receive an answer. Instead of a few words of comradely information, he was given a sharp rebuke: "What's this all about? Are these the kinds of people with whom you associate? With criminals and counter-revolutionaries?!"

My contact realized that it was time to let the matter drop.

In Kharkov there was a large synagogue building known as the Martzianer Shul. In fact it housed two synagogues — a larger one upstairs where the chassidim prayed, and a smaller one downstairs which followed the slightly different prayer rite known as *nussach Ashkenaz*. The upstairs congregation was burdened by an officially appointed "rabbi" — a latter-day *kazyonny ravvin* — by the name of Nachum Hadayyan, and it was common knowledge that the healthiest place for any observant Jew to be was anywhere except in his vicinity. Knowing of his connections with the authorities I decided to approach him. When I asked him to investigate my father's whereabouts he reassured me by saying that since official sources had queried him about my father, and he had given them a favorable report, he was certain that no harm would befall him.

I still had no information. With no alternative open to me, I again begged "my" *politruk* to use his good offices with his old friend, the Chief Prosecutor. Amazingly, he obliged, explaining his interest in his friend by the fact that he happened to know the prisoner's family, and so on.

"According to the information in hand," the Chief Prosecutor told him, "that prisoner's situation is more serious than that of the others. You see, since everyone spoke so highly of him it is clear that he has a great deal of influence over a wide circle of friends. It is therefore obvious that we cannot allow him to remain free."

And indeed it transpired that my father had been sentenced to five years' imprisonment with hard labor in a concentration camp near a town called Bandug in the Urals.

Ours was not the only chassidic home in Kharkov that was visited that night. There were arrests in Kiev, too, and on the same night the distinguished *ra'v* of Yekaterinoslav, R. Levi Yitzchak Schneerson — the father of the Lubavitcher Rebbe — was also arrested. Among the other well-known personages arrested that night were the late R. Avraham Baruch Pevsner, R. Meir Gurkov and R. Shmuel Cohen, as well as the above-mentioned R. Tzemach Gurevitch, who resides today in New York. The former two chassidim were exiled for years on end; the latter two were released after a short time.

As to my summons to NKVD headquarters with my sister, it later became apparent that its purpose was for the officials there to make the acquaintance of my father's children. They found what they expected — his son with a beard, his daughter dressed in a manner befitting the daughters of Israel. Our nonconformist identity was all too plain, and it seems that my father's cruel sentence was then decided upon.

As Pesach approached we tried every way possible to provide him with *matzos* so that he would not perish from sheer hunger. But we were denied the vaguest inkling of his whereabouts, and were left helpless. We later discovered that my father had been in the same cell as R. Meir Gurkov, and that the provisions that they had to last them through the eight days of Pesach totaled three cubes of sugar and one and a half onions. By the fourth day of Pesach my father had reached such a state of exhaustion that he was unable to leave his bed. In fact things reached the point that other prisoners searched for and found a lump of sugar with which he could keep together his lean body and lofty soul.

AS WE LATER learned, my father had been imprisoned for some months in our own city, Kharkov, before being exiled. When my

**Date of Decease** older brother attempted to find out which labor camp our father was held in, he equipped himself with some money and a bottle of vodka and set out in the general direction of the forced-labor camps. By a stroke of Divine Providence, while in the train he encountered a woman who happened to mention that her husband was the official responsible for the camps in the region towards which they were heading. He pleaded with her to help him in his blind quest, and in due course she gave him our father's exact whereabouts.

Arriving as directed, he was denied admittance to the camp, but managed nevertheless to arrange a meeting with our father, and to give him some clothes, as well as some onion and garlic that he had brought for him for health reasons. It was at this long-awaited meeting that our father told him of the unremitting hardships that were his lot, of the beatings he suffered for his refusal to work on *Shabbos* and festivals, of his constant hunger because of his unflinching insistence on observing the dietary laws, and of his being forced to go out to his slave labor when he was sick and in pain, with a fever of 104°.

With no further way of making life easier for our father, my brother returned home. Now that we had an address, we were able at least to send parcels with food and clothing. Very soon thereafter, however, we received them by return mail, marked with a few words scribbled by some camp official: "Date of decease — ..."

WORLD WAR II was whirling itself into a wild crescendo when my brother and I, having failed to secure exemptions from service in the brutal ranks of the Red Army, were conscripted.

**A Difficult Choice** The officer presiding over the committee that enlisted me handed me a note with an order to

shave off my beard. When it was apparent that I had ignored it I was summoned to give him an explanation. I told him that as an observant Jew I would not shave off my beard, whereupon he directed me to his superior officer, to whom I repeated these words.

At this point I was dispatched as a medical orderly to the front. Arriving there I was immediately questioned as to my beard, and gave the same answer. There was no reaction at the time, but the question was repeated the next day. This time I pointed out that I was perfectly entitled to leave my beard untouched.

"Then perhaps you'd like to know," said the officer, "that yesterday I made a special trip to Kharkov to consult with my superiors. When I told them of your stubborn refusal to shave they told me that they knew your family very, very well — your father, your mother, your brother and your sisters. Not only that: they confirmed my claim that I am prohibited by law from keeping in my ranks a soldier who goes unshaven. It only remains for me to warn you that they'll send you to the front firing lines. They need people like you there. And being posted out there means a ninety-nine percent chance of getting killed. So you'll have to make a decision."

Realizing that this had now become a literal question of life and death I consulted a responsible rabbinic authority, and then went off to Kharkov to buy the necessary powder.

ONE DAY MY fellow soldiers and I were asked whether any of us had a neat handwriting. I passed the test, but when the officer proposed that I be transferred to clerical tasks I told him that I would give him my reply the next day, since this might involve work on *Shabbos*. Eventually, I said that I would like to give the new work a week's trial.

After *Shabbos* I told my commanding officer that if he would grant me one favor only — the possibility of observing my holy day of rest — I would exert myself to the point that not only would he find his burdens lightened, he and his colleagues would find themselves with nothing to do. He gave me his word, and I threw myself into a sustained momentum of conscientious work. Finding that my extravagant promise had indeed been fulfilled, my officer and his delighted colleagues learned to wait patiently until stars were visible on Saturday evening before knocking on my door with fresh tasks for me to do.

My brother Yechezkel worked in a storeroom, and as such was able to set aside kosher food for both of us as well as for one other observant young soldier in our unit. As to spiritual provisions, I was fortunate enough to have my *tallis* and *tefillin* with me, and every day the three of us would take turns wearing them during the morning prayers. As Rosh H<sup>1</sup>shana drew near I managed to obtain a *shofar*, and when the time came we hid in a deserted railway carriage and blew it — not very loudly, perhaps, but punctiliously, exactly as the law prescribes.

FOR NINE MONTHS I served in my clerical position, by virtue of which I accumulated a varied assortment of official forms and rubber stamps in my possession. Accordingly, from time to time I would try to work out how I could utilize this circumstance toward securing a certificate of discharge for myself. One of my tasks was to join the rescue teams that went out to the battlefields by train, to take in the wounded and to give them first aid. (This train was equipped among other things with an emergency operating theater.) Their food, clothing, and other needs were attended to by means of the forms which I was authorized to sign.

One day, just before Pesach, a shell exploded and wrecked our packed train, and we were forced to spend a week or so in a Caucasian town called Orjenekidzieh. I went downtown in search of fellow Jews, and soon enough encountered a bearded gentleman who took quite some time to be convinced that he could speak to me without fear. I told him that he really must find me some way of baking *matzos* for Pesach, and that of course I would pay all expenses. He promised to oblige, and took me to a house where a

fellow Jews, and soon enough encountered a bearded gentleman who took quite some time to be convinced that he could speak to me without fear. I told him that he really must find me some way of baking *matzos* for Pesach, and that of course I would pay all expenses. He promised to oblige, and took me to a house where a wonderful surprise awaited me, for who should be sitting right there in that far-flung, unpronounceable town in the Caucasus but my good friend — R. Yisrael Leibov, today the national head of Tzeirei Agudas Chabad in *Eretz Yisrael*. My joy and relief were unbounded.

I asked him how best to secure a discharge from the army, keeping in mind the fact that my signature on all kinds of official forms carried weight. He began by explaining that the local conscription office included in its staff all kinds of medical experts except for oculists. Anyone with visual problems was referred to the civilian specialist who lived in town, by means of a letter that bore the patient's name but not his photograph.

R. Yisrael's advice was therefore simple and straightforward: "I know a young fellow here who has a serious visual problem. All you have to do is to go along to the local conscription office equipped with your ready-made letterhead signed by the commissar. This letter will confirm that you are unable to continue your military service because of the state of your eyes. They will automatically give you a letter referring you to the specialist in town. This letter you will bring straight to me, so that I can pass it on to my young friend, who will no doubt be only too pleased to do someone a favor. He will visit the specialist under the borrowed name of Yehoshua Pinson, and the expert will write him a discharge on the spot. You see? Simple and straightforward!"

And that was how I was once and for all exempted from service in the Red Army.

WHILE I WAS in that town I lived in the house of R. Shmuel Pindrik. Late one night, hearing an angry thumping on the door, someone opened up to discover two burly strangers, one in police uniform and one in civilian clothing. I was already in bed, half asleep. Suddenly the policeman strode across to me, whisked out a revolver, and told me not to budge. He and his friend then explained the purpose of their unsolicited visit, and ordered me to disclose where all the gold and silver and other valuables in the house were hidden. I told them that I had just come here from army service, and owned nothing. They therefore began to rummage themselves, and among their more valuable finds were my trousers. This was no laughing matter, for the pockets of those trousers were crammed with all kinds of counterfeit military forms that I had prepared for all eventualities.

Deciding that it was time to go home, they piled up whatever they thought was worth taking, threw it all into a big sack, and ordered my seventy-year-old landlord to carry it on his back and accompany them. R. Shmuel did as he was commanded, and walked ahead together with one of the robbers. The other stayed by my side, with his revolver poised an inch or two from my face, and told me to follow him to the door. My face broke out in a cold sweat. These were to be my last moments on earth — or so it seemed, for it was clear that when we reached the door he was going to do away with me with one swift bullet. Foolishly, though, he stepped over the

threshold just before me, and a kind Providence gave me the presence of mind to act in a flash. I slammed the door after him, and with shuddering hands held desperately on to the handle from the inside so that he would not be able to re-enter. One way or the other, my fate would be determined within the coming few seconds, and I prepared myself for either possible outcome. As it happened, thank G-d, the intruder went on his way, and I was able to relax.

I TIPTOED to the window, and by the pale light of dawn watched closely as he walked away. I was alive, but in a dilemma as to what to do next. To flee was impossible, because that would mean deserting my elderly benefactor in his hour of need; to remain was equally impossible, because the two strangers might decide at any moment to return.

The question was resolved by the sound of footsteps at the door — but this time it was not intruders: only little old R. Shmuel, a trifle paler than usual, but otherwise safe and sound. He told me that after an uneventful stroll his companion, by then joined by his friend, had told him to lay down the sack and to go home.

A moment later there were new footsteps outside the door. This time it was a couple of policemen who had caught the housebreakers redhanded. As they questioned me concerning the robbery, I had no option but to answer their incidental queries as to where I had come from and what I was doing in that house. At their further request I gave them an exact description of the robbers. This done, they stood me opposite a long line of their colleagues so that I would be able to point out to them which of these stalwart guardians of the law had been moonlighting. Not one of them, however, looked familiar.

A couple of hours later they returned and asked me whether I would recognize the two robbers if they were brought in before me. They were brought in, handcuffed, and I identified them at once. In keeping with the current norms of justice, the investigating police officer told me to get up and punch one of the offenders. I had barely stirred when the robber in question sprang forward to attack me, but at the last second was thrown down by a violent kick from the police officer.

When the two had been duly taken away I was led to the house of one of them, and was instructed to help the police check through every stolen item to ensure that nothing was missing, and to note down each item received. Another moment of dread — for now these two policemen would conscientiously check through my trouser pockets to make sure nothing was missing, and would there discover a rich array of forged official documents!

To make matters worse, they were exasperatingly methodical. One of them took out each garment from the sack and held it up lovingly, while his friend wrote down exactly what item this was, what was found intact in its pockets, and so on.

Finally, it was the turn of those wretched trousers: they were already in his hands!

"Do you know what?" I commented, as casually as ever. "Just jot down 'trousers', and we'll get on with the job. O.K.?"

And with that I took hold of them too, helped him toss them out of harm's way, and we got on with the job.

A miracle within a miracle!

