

# Nobility and Piety

"STUDYING RIVKY AND ARI'S LINEAGE IS RESEARCHING THE ROYALTY OF THE KINGDOM OF DAVID, THE SAGACITY OF THE BABYLONIAN ACADEMIES, THE NOBILITY OF THE JEWISH PRINCES OF SPAIN, THE ARISTOCRACY OF EUROPEAN JEWRY, AND THE PIETY OF THE ELDERS OF LUBAVITCH."



PREPARED FOR THE WEDDING OF  
ARI AND RIVKY MARKOWITZ

ל' תשרי ה'תש"ע  
OCTOBER 18, 2009

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*To Chana Wolvovsky OBM*

*A gracious Chein*

*A loving Lein*

*A regal Raskin*



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# CHAPTER ONE

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## THE CHOSSON AND KALLAH'S SHARED ROOTS

*“The mingling of the grapes of the vine with the grapes of the vine is beautiful and acceptable.”*

*-Talmud, Pesachim 49a*

A glance at the bride and groom's maternal family trees will reveal a shared distinguished ancestry. Rivky and Ari are descendants of Elchanan Lein and Chaim Dovid Lein respectively, two children of Rabbi Moshe Leib Lein of Nevel. While my brother may have heard that his prospective wife shared his genealogical heritage, the hard evidence lay in her apparent likeness to her biblical namesake, and thus, in a number of regards, the story of Rivky and Ari mimics that of the first Jewish marriage between Isaac and Rebbekah.

When Abraham sought a wife for his son Isaac, he tasked his loyal servant Eliezer with the awesome responsibility of searching for a girl who would be worthy of becoming Israel's second matriarch. Abraham looked to his own when seeking a spouse for his heir, instructing Eliezer to find a maiden from Abraham's family, “You shall go to my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife to my son Isaac . . .”

Eliezer set out with a trail of his master's camels, laden with riches and gifts for the bride to be, eventually arriving at the home of Abraham's kinsfolk, Aram Naharayim. As evening approached, Eliezer had the line of camels kneel down beside a well as he awaited the daughters of the city who would soon approach to draw water. The Abrahamic servant prayed that G-d assist him in his quest:

“Let it come to pass that the maiden to whom I shall say, ‘Please, set down your pitcher that I may drink,’ and she shall say, ‘drink, and I will give your camels drink also’ -- she is the one that You have appointed for Your servant Isaac . . .”

Before Eliezer had finished his appeal, an appealing Rebbekah appeared. Eliezer asked the girl if she would allow him to drink from her pitcher, which she graciously agreed to, adding as she gave the thirsty traveler drink that she would

gladly bring water for his convoy of camels. One by one, Rebekkah tended to the beasts with the same attention as she did with the stranger.

Even before confirming Rebbekah's lineage, Eliezer adorned her with jewelry, effectively betrothing her to Isaac. Rebbekah had essentially verified who she was. She was exceptionally kind, and undoubtedly of Abraham's kin.

Studying Rivky and Ari's lineage is researching the royalty of the kingdom of David, the sagacity of the Babylonian academies, the nobility of the Jewish princes of Spain, the aristocracy of European Jewry, and the piety of the elders of Lubavitch.

A full description of our family's origins and journey would fill volumes, as indeed it does. I herein attempt to present a glimpse into a story which spans our people's history of sovereignty, exile, and dispersion in the Diaspora. Primarily, this is the tale of the bride and groom's mutual family tree, past to present, as together they plant their seed in the garden of history. The following pages tell how the Chein-Lein families, a branch of the royal house of Shaltiel, made their way from the courts and study halls of Babylon to a wedding hall in Brooklyn.

In the summer of 1989, a distant relative of ours visited the British Museum while touring London. The high school graduate was looking through manuscripts in search of a Shakespearian folio when he glanced at a glass encasing which contained a work of art, and a link to his heritage. Joseph Shaltiel, who bears the surname of our family origins, found a 13th century decorative Passover Hagada described as having been the property of "The aristocratic Sephardic Shaltiel family."

Tha Hagada was crafted as a family treasure and heirloom, and aside from traditional liturgy, it contains inspired artistry and poetry. Included in the Hagada are dozens of liturgical poems which express faith in and love for G-d. One of the melodies that would typically be sung at a Shaltiel Seder was the popular "Shalom Leven Dodi" - greetings to my beloved, or literally, greetings to my cousin.

Our sages teach that marriage is the union of two halves of the same soul. My brother's matrimony is not merely a union with his beloved half, but a reunion with family and the expanse of the Jewish experience. It is my fervent hope that Rivky and Ari look to their past as they build their future together. May they recall their place in the fallen house of David, as they erect an everlasting edifice in Israel.

Getzy Markowitz

18 Elul 5769/Labor Day 2009

Brooklyn, NY

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# CHAPTER TWO

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## WHO ARE THE CHEINS?

*“Know from whence you came...”*

*-Ethics of the fathers chapter three*

A standard practice of Chabad Chasidim is beginning a written work or speech with D'var Malchus, words of majesty. Specifically, these are remarks of our Rebbes. The timeless Jewish tradition was echoed in the compositions of Rabbi Yoseph Yitzchak Schenerson, the sixth and previous Rebbe of Lubavitch, who would quote the Talmud's conversion of kingship to an implicit Rabbinate. Thus, as is the prevailing custom, we begin our tale of royalty with words of majesty.

In his correspondence, essays, and oratory, the previous Rebbe makes honorable references to the Chein family. In his published letters, Rabbi Yoseph Yitzchak refers to the sons of Rabbi Chaim Dovid Tzvi Chein, the famed Radatz, as “children of the holy exalted,”<sup>1</sup> an appellation typically reserved for Rebbes themselves. The sainted Radatz was the son of Rabbi Peretz Chein, chief Rabbi of Chernihiv, and was branded by the Tzemach Tzedek<sup>2</sup> as a “servant of G-d.”<sup>3</sup> The followers of the fourth Rebbe, Rabbi Shmuel, regarded the Radatz as a model of the lofty “Beinoni”<sup>4</sup> who “prays all day.” This class of saintliness is the central subject of the Tanya, Chabad's foundational text, and its attainment is the aspiration of Chassidim.<sup>5</sup>

While the Chein-Leins are certainly notable and respected within the Chassidic fold, less known is the place the tribe has occupied in the greater Jewish world. A member of our family was once asked by the Lubavitcher Rebbe if he knew that, “There were over eighteen generations of Rabbis and Gaonim<sup>6</sup> before Rabbi Peretz?” When he responded in the negative, the Rebbe insisted that, “It is an obligation to be aware of this.”<sup>7</sup>

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1 Igrot Kodesh of the Previous Rebbe, Vol. 2 page 303. See also Vol. 16 page 134 where the Rebbe refers to the Chein dynasty with the unusual term “Gezeh Tarshishim.”

2 Rabbi Menachem Mendel, the third Lubavitcher Rebbe

3 Igrot Kodesh of the Rebbe Maharash Vol. 14, page 441

4 Lit. the intermediate one. The Beinoni's toil and worship has brought him to perfection in thought, speech, and action, despite his still-active evil inclination. See Tanya chapter 12.

5 Rabbi Shmuel is said to have instructed the RaDatz to consider reaching the fully righteous level of a Tzadik.

6 Lit. geniuses. In ancient Babylon, Gaon was the title of the dean of the Talmudic academies of Sura and Pumpedita, a capacity filled by Chein ancestors.

7 Kfar Chabad magazine, issue 670, page 44

Who are the Cheins that they are renowned within the Chassidic brotherhood? Where did they come from that theirs is a household name, treated as a historical treasure? More accurately, who were their forbears to be considerably venerated by the great Rebbes of Lubavitch?

The Cheins are rooted in the rich history of Spanish Jewry, their name being a Hebrew derivative of Gracian, meaning grace or charm. In Spain, the Cheins were rabbinical, political, economical, and social titans. Originally of the house of Shaltiel, the highly regarded holders of the Gracian honorific are the direct descendants of King David.

Scholarly research has yielded documentation bearing the Gracian title. However, aside for the manuscripts and records discovered in the libraries and museums of Europe, the name can be found within the tomes of a basic Judaic collection, in the Responsa of the Rashba, Rabbi Shlomo ben Abraham Ibn Aderet.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from being a leading codifier and master of Jewish law during the post-Talmudic era, the Rashba was well-educated in philosophy and scientific reasoning, and opposed the untimely pursuit of philosophical study. He mandated maturity, intense Torah study, and devout prayer, as requisites for the learning of academic disciplines.

As rationalism spread across Europe, the examination of these subjects became a trend among young Jews who were adapting heretical tendencies, replacing theology with theory, and rejecting key tenets of our faith. In 1303, intellectual versatility superseded religious integrity in parts of France. Jewish intellectuals modified the philosophical works of Maimonides and other important thinkers to suit their study of Aristotelian rationalism. In response, the Provençal Rabbi Abba Mari sent a series of letters<sup>9</sup> to the “foremost leader of the generation,” seeking the Rashba’s wise counsel and authoritative intervention. In response, the Rabbinical court of Barcelona, with the Rashba at its helm, issued a ban on the study of Greek philosophy and secular wisdom, except for the study of medicine,<sup>10</sup> before reaching the age of twenty-five.<sup>11</sup>

Thirty-four members of the Rashba’s Beth Din<sup>12</sup> signed the decree granting far-reaching power to the edict of the Catalonian sage. Among these signers were a number of Shaltiels and Cheins, names synonymous with honor and rabbinical grandeur.

The Shaltiels arrived in Spain from Babylon at around 1058, escaping bloodshed and preserving their royal bloodline. They were scions of the House of David, and fugitives of the Islamic Caliphate.

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8 El Rab de’España - Chief Rabbi of Spain. The Rashba’s commentary on the Talmud is standard curriculum in Rabbinical seminaries. Thousands of the Rashba’s Responsa are widely quoted by Halakhik authorities.

9 The correspondences were later compiled under the title “Minchat Kenaot.”

10 Based on the Talmud, Brochat 60a which derives from Exodus 21:19 that Torah permits a physician to heal.

11 See Responsa of the Rashba sections 415-417

12 A Rabbinical court

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## CHAPTER THREE

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### THE EXILEARCHATE

*“By the waters of Babylon we sat and wept as we recalled Zion...If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither, let my tongue cleave to my palate if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.”*

*-Psalm 137*

Around 1500 years before the Shaltiels arrived in Spain, Jerusalem was a Babylonian dependency, and the prized domicile of the Jewish people. Seated on the throne of Judea was the last of the Davidic Kings, Jehoiachin. Jehoiachin was successor to his father King Jehoiakim,<sup>13</sup> who was assassinated during a failed rebellion against emperor Nebuchadnezzar.

During Jehoiachin’s rule, Egypt revolted against Babylon. The royal court in Jerusalem believed that Babylon would be defeated. The king’s advisors, family, and Jerusalem’s holy men advised Jehoiachin to join the revolt and reclaim Judean autonomy. Thus ended the glorious reign of the Davidic line. Nebuchadnezzar quelled the Egyptian rebellion and turned his attention to Jerusalem.

Jehoiachin understood that the capital was doomed, and bravely surrendered himself in hope of saving the city. The king, accompanied by the royal family, left Jerusalem by foot and ceded to Nebuchadnezzar. Impressed by the gesture, Nebuchadnezzar spared Jerusalem and her rulers. He exiled ten thousand of the city’s elite. The poor were left behind under Jehoiachin’s uncle Zedekiah, who was appointed as a vassal.

Jehoiachin spent thirty years in prison, only to be released after his captors’ demise. Together with the prophet Ezekiel, Jehoiachin made a move toward self-government by creating institutions that supported Jewish life in exile. Babylon’s new rulers saw these steps as advantageous, rather than treacherous. It was convenient to have the important ethnic group collect their own taxes and supervise their clan’s affairs. Jehoiachin was officially recognized in an executive capacity, and the Jewish people were saved from assimilation.

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<sup>13</sup> King Jehoiakim may have been killed by a pro-Babylonian party or by a palace faction.

After Jehoiachin's passing, his son Shaltiel assumed his father's position by becoming the head of the Diaspora, and the first official Rosh Hagolah, or Exilearch. As Shaltiel, subsequent Exilearchs were called 'Mar,' and the title was inherited by his lineage for over 1600 years.

The dominion of the Exilearchate lasted through Persian and Byzantine empires, and their power increased under the Caliphs. Generally, the Rosh Hagolah's leadership was a secular and administrative one, and religious authority was ceded to the Gaonim, or deans of the Talmudic academies of Sura and Pumbedita, some of whom were aristocratic descendants of King David. Mar Chizkiah was elected as dean of Pumbedita, and served from 1038 to 1058. Following a court intrigue, the last puissant Exilearch was executed by the Caliph of Baghdad.

Shmuel ha-Nagid was a Spanish contemporary of Mar Chizkiah. The Nagid was an assistant vizier to the Berber ruler King Badi. Shmuel emphasized Judaism's universal character and the need for solidarity. He offered financial assistance to the Babylonian Jewish establishment. Shmuel ha-Nagid was a close friend to the Gaonim, and confidant of Mar Chizkiah. When Shmuel passed away, King Badi appointed his son Yoseph to the post of his father who had trained him well for the position.

Following Mar Chizkiah's murder, his two sons fled to Spain and found asylum in Grenada in the home of Yoseph ha-Nagid. Their names were Mar Shaltiel and Mar Yosef Oroved, heirs to the Judean monarchy and progenitors of the "families of N'si'im," the princes of Spanish Jewry.

In the autumn of 1066, Yoseph ha-Nagid was killed in a violent Muslim uprising. Thousand of Jews were butchered, and "Granata al-Yahud" (Granada of the Jews) was practically destroyed. At least one of Mar Chizkiah's sons managed to escape the massacre and settled in autonomous Aragon, preserving the distinct pedigree of David. In 1090, Mar Shaltiel's first cousin Chizkiah II returned to Baghdad to restore the Exilearchate. Subsequently, his Spanish relatives stopped using Mar as a title, but continued the functions of that label.

In Spain, the family multiplied and as they increased over the generations, their children established branches of the Shaltiel dynasty. One of the families adopted Chein, meaning gracious or charming, as their surname, using its Spanish equivalent Gracian at times. Over the next few centuries these names would be appended to Rabbinic injunctions, mentioned in Halakhik literature, and thought of as expressions of excellence of character, and celebrated stature.

Two days before arriving in Barcelona, the 12th century Navarrese adventurer Benjamin of Tudela wrote about the city buzzing with Jewish life: "The city though small is handsome and is situated on the seashore. Merchants resort thither for goods from all parts of the world." The explorer anticipated visiting the community, which had a "congregation of wise, learned, and princely men." These included "Rabbi Shesheth, Rabbi Shaltiel, and Rabbi Shlomo ben Chisdai." Other Shaltiel relatives included the Perfet, Benveniste, Cavaller, and Cresques families,

all recorded to have served their sovereigns, and enriched their communities for four hundred years.

Rabbi Yehudah ben Barzilai was the Nassi of Barcelona during the 12th century. Yehuda penned a number of Halakhik treatises that were highly regarded by the Rishonim, and he is even mentioned in a Tosfos. In the Responsa of the Tashbatz, Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemach Doron traces his revered contemporary, “The great Rabbi of prestigious lineage,” Rabbi Yehuda, to “the Shaltiel family of Catalonia.”

Other family members included Rabbi Zechariah ben Yitzchak Ben Shaltiel Chein Gracian, who emigrated to Rome in 1277. Zechariah’s extensive knowledge of Maimonides’ Guide to the Perplexed deemed him an expert in the philosophical missives.

When Rabbi Nissim ben Reuven of Gerona,<sup>14</sup> one of Spain’s last medieval Talmudists, passed away, he was succeeded by his student Shaltiel bar Shlomo Chein-Gracian, Rabbi of Alcala. Rabbi Shaltiel studied and corresponded with Rabbi Yitzchak ben Shesheth<sup>15</sup> who praised Barcelona’s chief Rabbinic authority directly: “Great are you in wisdom and strength to be reckoned among the sages.”

The Shaltiels ranked among Spain’s greatest thinkers, teachers, physicians, and politicians. They served as doctors and diplomats in the courts of Aragon. As princes of their people, they placed tradition before ambition.

Spain’s infamous pogroms of 5151 (1391) claimed the lives of hundreds of Jews, including Catalonia’s beloved Rabbi Gracian Shaltiel ben Astrug Chein, a tenth generation descendant of the original Mar Shaltiel. One hundred years before the inquisition, some survivors of the thousand-year-old family fled, as did their ancestors before them, and as would their children after them.

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<sup>14</sup> The RaN

<sup>15</sup> The RiVaSh. Rabbi Yitzchak ben Shesheth was a Shaltiel descendant.

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# CHAPTER FOUR

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## THE SHALTIELS OF CANDIA

*“Judah will exist forever, and Jerusalem  
from generation to generation”*

*-Joel 4:20*

On Rosh Chodesh Taamuz 5151, corresponding to June 6 1391, the Jewish community of Seville was attacked in a brutal pogrom, which soon spread across Spain. The violence lasted for a century, culminating in the Spanish Expulsion of 1492. The Golden Age of Spanish Jewry had come to a close, and the seeds of the Inquisition had taken root.

As Spain was engulfed in the massacre and forced mass conversion of Jews, many members of the Shaltiel family returned eastward, including the family of Rabbi Shlomo ben Shaltiel Chein, who settled in Constantinople. The pedigree of King David and the former princes of Jewish Spain maintained their status under Ottoman rule. In 1500, a descendant of Rabbi Shlomo was appointed as the first Kahya, the leader of the Jewish community, recognized by the Ottoman Empire. He wielded the power of the Sultan’s courtier.

In later years, the family split into groups, resettling across Europe and Northern Africa. Algeria and Tunis became the homes of the Chaltiels. By way of Gibraltar, England absorbed a number of Shaltiels. Italy was the new home of the Grazianis, who would later branch out to Bulgaria. Primarily, the Shaltiels of Constantinople moved to Candia, in the rich Mediterranean Island of Crete.

Remarkably, the life and times of the Shaltiel-Chein families of Crete are well documented in Responsa, and in the famous Takanot, decrees of Candia.

The effects of the early Renaissance and an influx of immigration challenged Torah-true values and time-honored ethical standards by introducing new trends to the Jewish community of Crete. Engaged Jewish couples began moving in together before being married, and some Jewish youth behaved in an immodest manner that is unbecoming of daughters and sons of Israel. The practice of a bride immersing herself in a Mikvah on the eve of her marriage became nearly impossible, as men would frequent the ritual bath during the summer to cool off

and relax. Secularity became the new morality in a number of other regards, and to counter the dilution of Jewish tradition a series of decrees were issued.

Sixteen of the Cretan decrees regulating Jewish life in Candia are attributed to five Cheins “of the Shaltiel family.” They included firm ordinances issued by Emmanuel Chein and Shmuel Del Medigo against the aforementioned dishonorable behavior. In another edict, Emmanuel made a stance in defense of a young lady who was barred from marrying her intended spouse under the false assumption that she had been betrothed to another man.

Dubbed “the scholar,” and “the physician,” Emmanuel worked to introduce strict certification and sealing methods for kosher wines. On November 16, 1525, Emmanuel, his son Shaltiel, Eliyahu Capsali, and Menachem Del Medigo published a comprehensive guide addressing areas of Jewish law that had been relaxed. Together they promoted the faithful observance of the Jewish dietary laws, Shabbos, and abstinence from prenuptial relations.

Yehudah Chein was a Talmudic scholar, and au fait in medical and veterinary skills. He used his expertise to meticulously outline the proper preparation and procedure for kosher slaughter. Cretan Jews referred to Yehudah as their “champion” and “the great master” and a penalty was enforced for insubordination. Yehuda and the Cheins took on the virtuous cause of ransoming Jewish captives, even permitting the sale of religious ornaments and paraphernalia to secure the liberation of their brethren.

A testament to the Chein family’s worthy standing in Crete is a royal emblem perched on the only standing synagogue on the island.<sup>16</sup> A depiction of a crowned Lion of Judah raising a sword and bearing an anthropomorphic face makes up the Shaltiel Coat of Arms, our treasured family standard.

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<sup>16</sup> The synagogue was renovated by Graziani Shaltiel in the mid-16th century. Graziani requested that the escutcheon be placed above the ark. This posed a dilemma as it is forbidden to bow before molten images. After consulting with leading authorities including Rabbi Yoseph Caro, the author of the Code of Jewish Law, a compromise was reached and the emblem was positioned above the facade of the “tall synagogue.” The original Shaltiel Coat of Arms is on display at the Historical Museum of Crete.

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# CHAPTER FIVE

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## ELCHANAN CHEIN

*“Fortunate are we! How good is our portion, how pleasant our lot, and how beautiful our heritage”*

*-From the morning prayers*

Many prestigious titles have been appended to our family names for three thousand years. Our first royal patriarch was called “Melech.” Generations of his direct descendants were respectfully known as “Reish Galusa” or “Gaon.” Their children were the “Nes’im.” And for over two centuries now, many of the Shaltiel offspring have proudly carried such epithets as “Chasidim,” and “Temimim.”<sup>17</sup> They are the Chein-Lein-Raskins of Chabad-Lubavitch.

The most dear members of our family carry another beloved appellation, “Neshei Chabad.” It is our women to whom we can attribute our greatest triumphs, and whom we lean on in times of trial. Their heightened sense of reality has guided their lives of self-sacrifice, and brought us to where we are today.

To the credit of his mother, Rabbi Elchanan Chein was the first Shaltiel to become a Chabad Chossid. While his mother’s name seems to have been lost, her essence and sensibility has not been forgotten. She was a descendant of the famed Rabbi of Schottland, Germany, Rabbi Elchanan, known in Torah study halls as the “Sidrei Tahara.” However, more than anything else, she was a true Yidishe Mame.

Between 1780-1785, a certain Rabbi Alexander Sender visited Schottland. Sender was an adherent of the first Chabad Rebbe and made his annual trip from Shklov in Belarus, to the grand trade fair of Leipzig, Germany. At the mysterious directive of the Rebbe, Sender detoured to Schottland en-route to the grand bazaar. As a deeply observant Jew, Sender sought a home in Schottland that boasted high religious standards, where he and his party of nearly ten men could enjoy a fitting Shabbos.

They were directed to the home of an “intelligent and G-d fearing lady,” the daughter of a “prominent, saintly, and scholarly Rabbi.” She was reputed to observe the dietary laws and maintain her home with stringency. However, the

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<sup>17</sup> A description of a student of Tomchei Temimim, the United Lubavitcher Yeshivah.

lady's husband, Rabbi Meir Chein, was out of town for vocational reasons. At first she rejected the guests, emphasizing that it was inappropriate for her to entertain strange men in her husband's absence, but when she heard that the group numbered nearly ten men, all of whom were pious Torah scholars, she graciously received them.

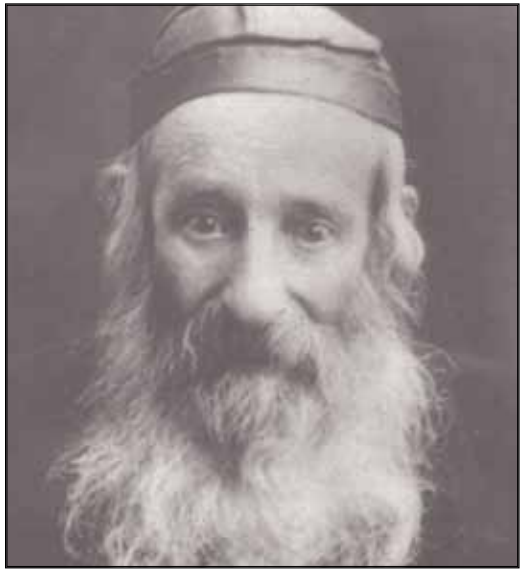
The Friday evening Shabbos meal was filled with a non-ending stream of passionate Torah discussion, and the illimitable words contained within lyricless Chassidic melodies.

Suddenly, the group heard their hostess weeping in the kitchen. Sender hurried to discover the cause for the outburst, and was told by a nostalgic daughter how she had not witnessed such a moving Shabbos since the passing of her father, the late Rabbi of Schottland. She went on to describe new bureaucratic decrees which mandated that all youth be schooled in government institutions. Naturally, she was concerned that her young son, Elchanan, would not receive a proper Jewish education. Then, she did the unthinkable. Having just witnessed the fervency and integrity of her guests, she requested that Sender take her son with him to Russia where Elchanan could study and be raised under the tutelage of the Chassidim.

A pious woman bid farewell to her young son, who would grow to be a disciple of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Chabad Rebbe. After marrying, Elchanan had a son whom he named after his father. Seven generations later, countless Lubavitcher men and boys bear the name of the legendary Peretz Chein.



Menachem Mendel HYD  
son of *Chaim Dovid Lein*



Chaim Dovid  
son of *Moshe Leib (Chein) Lein*



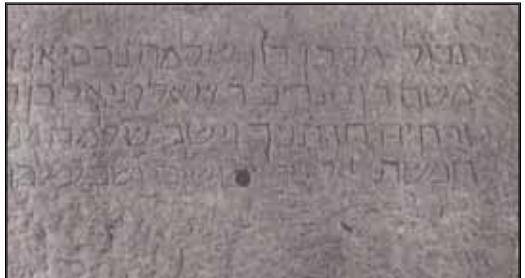
Zeide Aharon Leib Lein HYD



Bubbe Doba and her children, Yechiel Michel, Sholom Ber, Chaim Dovid, and Benzion Raskin-Lein



The Shaltiel Coat of Arms, our treasured family standard on display at the Historical Museum of Crete



Headstone of the Shaltiel family plot on display at the National Museum in Barcelona



The Chosson, his twin brother Yankie, and cousin Ari, approach the Rebbe



The Kallah receiving a dollar from the Rebbe



The Chosson and his twin brother Yankie receive "Kois Shel Brocha," a cup of benediction, from the Rebbe as their father Nachum looks on



The Rebbe's letter of blessings for the marriage of the Kallah's parents



The Rebbe officiates at the Chupa of Michel and Dania Raskin-Lein



The Rebbe's letter of blessings for the marriage of the Chosson's parents

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# CHAPTER SIX

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## PERETZ CHEIN

*“Your eyes will behold your Teacher”*

*-Isaiah 30:20*

Peretz Chein is perhaps the most famous figure in recent family history given his prominent place in the essential moldings of Chabad. Peretz might have been born in Smilian circa 1797, but records unquestionably place him as the Rabbi of Beshenkovitz, Nevel, and Chernihiv at various points.

Peretz lived to call three leaders of Chabad his Rebbe. Correspondingly, the great Rebbes affectionately counted him as their Chossid. He three times encountered the Alter Rebbe. As a young boy Peretz observed the founder of Chabad praying, and turned to his father in exclamation, “Father, that Jew has a flame upon his head.” Reaching the age and status of Bar Mitzvah, the Alter Rebbe examined Peretz’s scholastic achievements, testing him on the intricate laws of the sanctification of a new month. Thus, at a young age, he exhibited the signs of being attuned to loftier things, and of being a child prodigy.

The third time that Peretz saw the Alter Rebbe was while the Rebbe dined. It was clear that his connection to the Rebbes was what sustained him, for whenever Peretz spoke of these experiences, he would cry.

Some time before turning twenty-two, Peretz was urged by the Mitteler Rebbe to become the senior Rabbi of Beshenkovitz. However, Peretz was hesitant, fearing the reputation of a particular resident, Aaron Tsesliser, who would later become a Chossid of the Mitteler Rebbe, and was known to be harsh and challenging at times.

The Rebbe insisted that “Heaven ordained” Peretz’s assumption of the Rabbinate in Beshenkovitz, and that his shouldering of the new position would rest on the Rebbe’s own shoulders. Aaron proved to be quite the contender, and it has been speculated that the unpleasant discord is what caused Peretz to leave Beshenkovitz and become the Rabbi of Nevel.

Following the Mittlerer Rebbe's passing, a number of respected Chassidim appealed to his son, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, to accept the mantle of leadership. Peretz was one of the wise men to urge Menachem Mendel to become the new Rebbe, later to be known as the Tzemach Tzedek. According to the previous Lubavitcher, Peretz was a member of an inner circle of Chassidic elders, and his opinion was favorably considered by the Tzemach Tzedek.

Peretz would regularly enter the Tzemach Tzedek's study during his visits to Lubavitch, and although his counsel was highly regarded by the Rebbe, Peretz was an ardent and true Chossid.

Peretz's final rabbinic position was filled during the last year of the Tzemach Tzedek's life. Presented a choice of becoming rabbi of Chernihiv or Dvinsk, Peretz entered the Tzemach Tzedek's study and was greeted by the Rebbe raising a glass and toasting a L'chaim as he referred to Peretz as the "Rav of Chernihiv."

Peretz helped arbitrate certain disputes between the Tzemach Tzedek's sons following their father's passing. And, when Rabbi Shmuel, the Maharash, became Rebbe, Peretz became his devoted Chossid.

Rabbi Peretz Chein lived to see six of seven generations of Lubavitcher Rebbes. He was a Chossid of the first, second, third, and fourth Rebbes. He met the fifth Rebbe, the Rashab, before he was the leader of Lubavitch, and saw Rashab's son, the sixth and previous Rebbe, as an infant.

Peretz Chein passed away after having prayed on the morning of Iyar 26, 1883. He was succeeded in Chernihiv by his son Rabbi Chaim Dovid Tzvi, the Radatz. His other son Reb Moshe Leib would become the progenitor of Rivky and Ari's families.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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### MOSHE LEIB (CHEIN) LEIN

*“Nyet Nyet Nikavo: G-d is One, His name is One,  
besides him there is no one.”*

*-Russian Chassidic song*

During the reign of Nicholas I, Emperor of Russia, Jewish children were victimized and propagandized. Some of their own people, referred to as the “Kontonistim,” would snatch Jewish youth and deliver them to government bodies to fill a quota mandated by law. These children would be torn from their family and their Jewish environments. In their youth they would be tried and pressed to the limits. Physically overburdened and mentally tormented, the unfortunate children who would survive the terrible conditions and circumstances were drafted into the Czar’s army upon turning eighteen. In an attempt to convert the Jewish youth to Christianity, the boys would be enlisted for twenty-five years.

Moshe, the son of Peretz Chein, was one such seized child. Jewish parents and communities went to great lengths to rescue their children from forced conscription and conversion. Desperate, Moshe’s parents devised a means to evade the cruel law, while cunningly working within the law.

Russian recruitment regulations absolved adopted or only children from military service. The Cheins modified their son’s documents. Altering Russian phonetics, they abraded the upper part of the letter X, leaving an inverted V in its place. Chein, was now pronounced Lein, and Moshe Lein was an adopted lad who was to be spared.

The dangerous move saved Moshe’s life and introduced a “new” branch onto the Shaltiel family tree. The Lein family have stuck to their revised surname ever since. In fact, Moshe’s son, Chaim Dovid Lein, once asked the Rebbe Rashab if the family should return to their honored patronymic. The Rebbe pointed out that the new name had rescued their father, thus they should bear it.

Moshe served as a ritual slaughterer in Nevel and remained in the Chassidic bastion after his father Peretz assumed the Rabbinate in Chernihiv.

Of his three known children two were Rivky's great-great grandfather, Elchanan (circa 1845-1910), and Ari's great-great-great grandfather, Chaim Dovid.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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### CHAIM DOVID LEIN

*“Saying Tehillim every day and the entire Tehillim on Shabbat m’varchim...is crucial for you, for your children and your children’s children.”*

*-Hayom Yom entry for 25 Shevat*

Rabbi Chaim Dovid Lein was born in Nevel circa 1850. He married his wife Tzivia at a fairly young age and studied in the court of Rabbi Shmuel, the fourth Rebbe of Lubavitch.

Chaim Dovid became Nevel’s respected ritual slaughterer, and served as the shoichet even as a Chassidic elder. Once, suspecting that perhaps his hands weren’t as steady as they used to, or ought to be, Chaim Dovid travelled to the Rebbe Rashab to seek his counsel. The Rebbe had his Chossid balance a full cup of wine in the palm of his hand, to test if his hands were shaky enough as to cause a spill. Not a drop fell from the vintage Chossid’s cup and he continued to faithfully serve the community for years to come.

Once, on a cold and snowy Russian night, a Chossid received a mysterious knock on his door. Fearing Soviet officers who would arrest Jews in the middle of the night, he anxiously answered the door to discover Chaim Dovid in the doorway. Nevel’s shoichet had been assiduously studying the text of a Chassidic discourse, but his candle had dissolved. Looking to his would-be host, Chaim Dovid explained that he had seen that there was light in his home, and asked to be allowed to finish the discourse there.

In the early years of his leadership, the Previous Rebbe proudly claimed Rabbi Chaim Dovid as one of his closest Chassidim. Later, the Previous Rebbe accredited a crucial Chabad custom to his beloved Chossid. Chaim Dovid approached the Rebbe with the suggestion that Chassidim recite the entire book of King David’s Psalms every Shabbos morning. The Rebbe amended and adapted the suggestion, instituting the Lubavitch custom of reading the book of Tehilim on a Shabbos which precedes a new month.

As an elderly man, Chaim Dovid continued to provide Kosher slaughter in Nevel and was assisted by his mighty son Menachem Mendel, one of Nevel's brave martyrs.

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## CHAPTER NINE

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# THE HORRIFIC MURDERS OF TZIVIA, MENACHEM MENDEL, AND RIVKAH RAIZA LEIN

*“O nations, sing the praises of His people, for He will  
avenge the blood of His servants, bring retribution upon  
His enemies, and placate His land and His people”*

*-Deuteronomy 32:43*

Tzivia Lein, her son Menachem Mendel and his wife Rivkah Raiza were sadistically murdered when the Germans took Nevel in 1941. Menachem Mendel was a giant of a man who would restrain cattle on his own as his father slaughtered livestock in accordance with Jewish law. The Nazis hung Menachem Mendel by his hand for three consecutive days. He was sustained by the nourishment of his mother, who would stealthily feed her son under the cover of darkness.

For three days, the townspeople pleaded with the Germans to cut Menachem Mendel down as his dreadful bellowing robbed them of their sleep and disturbed them throughout the day. Finally, at the end of the third day of the diabolical torture two Germans approached the suffering Jew to let him down. One officer released him as another stood guard.

As Menachem Mendel's feet reached the ground he struck a mighty blow at the German who had cut him loose, killing the officer. Menachem Mendel was shot dead by the officer standing watch.

When Tzivia was approximately thirty years old, her husband Chaim Dovid, said to be thirty-three at the time, told her about the practice of acquiring Tachrichim - Jewish burial shrouds - at a young age as an omen for longevity (they both lived into their late eighties). Once her son had been killed, Tzivia could not cope with the anguish. Clothing herself in the traditional white shrouds she walked to the cemetery and lay beside the grave of her deceased husband.

Tzivia was discovered the next day and was taken back to Nevel still clothed in Tachrichim. They brought her to the home of her bereaving daughter-in-law where the savages locked the two women in a cabinet and set fire to the house, burning them alive.

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# CHAPTER TEN

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## SHEA-BESHENKOVITZE RABBI YEHOSHUA LEIN

*“Remember with mercy the Chassidim (pious ones),  
the upright, and the Temimim (perfect ones), the holy  
communities who gave their lives for the sanctification  
of the Divine Name,”*

*-From the weekly memorial prayer for the souls of Jewish martyrs*

Writing about Yehoshua Lein is done differently than the distinguished ancestors who came before him in time, and in the space of this compilation. Simply, while he was “genius,” “great,” “Chossid” and “Rabbi,” in our rearing he has always been “Zeide,” our beloved Zeide’s Zeide.

Zeide Yehoshua was born in Nevel circa 1881. His birth preceded the October Revolution of 1917, but much of his life would be spent in the baleful shadow of the Bolsheviks.

When their son reached the age of Bar Mitzvah, Chaim Dovid and Tzivia sent him to live and learn in Chernihiv, in the home of his great uncle, the famed Radatz. There, young Yehoshua continued the tradition of gifted Cheins who studied in the home of the family’s saintly and scholarly senior figure.

Jewish law requires firstborn males to fast on the eve of Passover, unless they can hear or say a “Siyum,” from someone who has concluded the study of a tractate of Talmud. Although he was only Bar Mitzva age, Yehoshua concluded the study of a full book of Talmud in time for the fast of the first-born and intended to give a traditional recitation of the material in synagogue. However, the Radatz forbade him from presiding over the confab, aiming to hedge off any feelings of haughtiness in the adept child.

A deferential Yehoshua chose to fast instead of delivering the review that would absolve him from his firstborn duties. However, his mentor directed him to hear a "Siyum" as would all the other firstborns, from someone else who had mastered a tractate.

On his first visit to the Rebbe Rashab, he requested that Yehoshua remain near him. The Rebbe blessed Yehoshua that G-d almighty grant that he have the desire and capacity to study, and most importantly that he be a G-d fearing Jew.

After being under the tutelage of the Radatz for a number of years, Yehoshua joined the advanced young men who studied at the court of the Rebbe Rashab in Lubavitch. His studying companions included Yerachmiel Jacobson who would become a Rabbi in London, and later in Montreal, Shlomo Zalman Havlan who set up the Yeshiva Toras Emes in Hebron, and others. Once Tomchei Temimim, the United Lubavitcher Yeshiva, was formally established, Yehoshua proudly carried the label "Tomim," the distinct title given to a student of the Rebbe's Yeshiva.

Once while the Rebbe Rashab presided over a public gathering of Chassidim, he announced that, "Yehoshua is mine." Indeed, Zeide Yehoshua's self abnegation, and perfect dedication to the Rebbe is noted. He was to his beloved as his beloved was to him.

After marrying, Yehoshua visited the Rebbe to receive spiritual guidance for his spiritual life and direction for serving the Creator. Until his last day Zeide Yehoshua selflessly served the one G-d, and the needs of His singular people.

Among Lubavitcher Chassidim, the year 1906 has become a symbol of sentimentalism. It was the year when the Rebbe Rashab delivered some of the most sublime dissertations of Chassidism. Until this very day, clever students explore the world of Chassidic thought eager to amass enough knowledge and training to study the masterly treatise known simply as "Samach Vov."

In the same year that the Rebbe Rashab delivered Samach Vov, he dispatched Zeide Yehoshua to the Lithuanian Chassidic fortress of Dokshitz to establish a branch of Tomchei Temimim for a select group of students.

Among Zeide Yehoshua's sixteen gifted pupils was Rabbi Mordechai Perlow, the author of Chabad's cherished "Kuntres Hasipurim," who would become an illustrious rabbi in Soviet Georgia, Italy, and Australia. In his book, Rabbi Perlow quotes a number of stories in the name of his teacher, and describes Zeide Yehoshua as a man who could articulate all of Talmud, and the major works of Jewish jurisprudence and their commentaries, from memory.

Eventually the Rebbe Rashab motivated Zeide Yehoshua to take up the position of Rabbi of Ostrovna, a town near Vitebsk. Then, in 1911, four generations after Peretz Chein served as Rabbi of Beshenkovitz, his great-grandson became the city's rabbinic authority. The inhabitants of Beshenkovitz would apply to Yehoshua the biblical verse "and the fourth generation shall return here."

When a fire erupted in the Lein home, Zeide Yehoshua's certificate of Rabbinical ordination was destroyed along with other possessions. As a result, the pious man ceased serving as a Rabbi. He no longer officiated at weddings, or oversaw kosher certification. Accounts of what had happened reached the razor sharp Rabbi Yoseph Rosen, the Rogochover Gaon who immediately issued a new superlative certificate.

Once Lenin and his Bolsheviks seized power, Jewish figures were forced into hiding. Zeide Yehoshua sought refuge in his parents' modest home in Nevel. Given a small area of the house, Yehoshua established a branch of Tomchei Temimim, the Rebbe's school. A fiery orator, Zeide Yehoshua openly preached and taught in Nevel, until the Soviets hounded him down again. Yehoshua's family fled to Rudnia where he became the underground rabbi and ritual slaughterer.

Aside from his life being made a living hell by the Soviets, Yehoshua barely earned a living. He would spend most of his day in fervent prayer, effectively minimizing his clientele who wouldn't wait around for him to finish praying to slaughter their fowl. Also, once Zeide Yehoshua would determine that a particular chicken was not kosher, he would pay for his "customers" to get a new one, so that they would not seek another means to slaughter their bird out of desperation.

The Leins would take in children whose parents were arrested, exiled, or sent to hard labor camps for their crimes of being Jewish. One of these children was Rabbi Sholom Ber Notik who retained the lessons and stories of his custodian.

In Rudnia, Zeide Yehoshua would publicly teach homiletical Talmudic classes, and defend and promote Judaism. He was eventually arrested on trumped up charges of "counterrevolutionary activities." They accused him of plotting to blow up Rudnia's bridge.

He was incarcerated for eight months during which time his wife Riva sent a letter to Stalin, pleading for mercy and the leader of the Soviet Union's pardon.

When he was released, Yehoshua went to the home of his son, Zeideh Aharon Leib, in Leningrad. There they held a celebratory and thanksgiving "Farbrengen," and returned to Rudnia.

Given the nearly impossible conditions of the big city, Zeide Aharon Leib sent his eldest son, our Zeide Michel, to spend some time with his grandfather in Rudnia. There he could be exposed to more normal Jewish life and the Yiddish language, which in Rudnia was even spoken by gentiles.

One need only observe Zeide's expressions and see the look in his eye when he speaks of his Zeide, to recognize the figure that was Yehoshua Lein.

While Zeide Michel lived in his grandfather's home, a Chossid brought a sheep to be properly prepared by Zeide Yehoshua. Yehoshua had his young son Peretz and his grandson Michel observe the kosher slaughter. Watching the gushing blood,

Zeide Michel looked faint. The Chossid respectfully criticized Zeide Yehoshua for having allowed such a young child to witness the gory scene. Yehoshua's response was that he had the child view the slaughter "that he may see that Jewish food is different!"

When an elderly Jew once passed away, Zeide Yehoshua hurried to provide the man with his rites of Jewish burial, including the preparatory cleansing ceremony. He took Peretz and Zeide Michel along. When asked by the other men who would perform these rites on the deceased why their rabbi had brought the youngsters along, he assertively replied: "so that they should see that a Jew dies differently!"

Indeed, Zeideh Yehoshua died as a Jew. Differently, and barbarically.

When the Nazis invaded Rudnia, they segregated the Jews into a small section of town. Then, perhaps on 30 Tishrei 1941, like sheep led to their slaughter, the Jews of Rudnia, their faithful shepherd Rabbi Yehoshua and his family at their head, were marched to a field outside of town. Anyone who tried to save himself by running was shot and thrown into a gigantic pit that had been dug. The others were forced into the mass grave and were buried alive. The Nazis waited beside the site, waiting for the earth to stop quaking before they moved on to their next victims. Among the approximately one thousand Jews who were killed was Zeide Yehoshua, his wife, and their children Nessah and Peretz.

In 1964, the site containing the remains of the Rudnian victims was opened under the sponsorship of the Jewish Agency of London. Excavators were shocked to discover the fully intact remains of one man who looked "as though he was napping" and was clutching a book of Psalms in his hand. They brought an elderly woman who had lived in Rudnia before Nazi occupation to identify the strange find. Hysterically, she shouted "The rabbi! The rabbi!"

The previous Lubavitcher Rebbe testified to Zeide Yehoshua's being what his great uncle and teacher the Radatz was called by the Rebbe Maharash: The Beinoni of Tanya. And as I have written in chapter two, "This class of saintliness is the central subject of the Tanya, Chabad's foundational text, and its attainment is the aspiration of Chassidim."

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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### THE CHOSSON'S NAMESAKE ZEIDE AHARON LEIB LEIN

*"The scepter shall not depart from Judah nor a scholar from among his descendants until Shiloh (Moshiach) arrives"*

*-Genesis 49:10*

To fully describe the life and living legacy of our grandfather's father, Zeide Aharon Leib, would require a volume telling of a life short lived, but everlastingly sustained. In my own hundreds of hours of breakfasts, thousands of teas, and miles of walks with Zeide Michel, I have attempted to absorb the figure in his life that has never died.

Born in Beshenkovitz on the fifth evening of Chanukah, 1905, Aharon Leib was destined to become a great man, the magnitude of which he filled during his ephemeral life, and continues to fill posthumously. He was skilled, had a beautiful melodic voice, and was a strikingly handsome man. Witnesses speak of how the young Aharon Leib would "get lost in prayer," so intense was his devotion to G-d.

Zeide Michel often speaks of a time when he returned home early from school to discover his father wrapped in a talit and tefillin. Oblivious to his son's presence, Zeide Aharon Leib was facing the wall and sobbed as he prayed with an intensity that his son had never seen before. Zeide Michel was transfixed as he watched the amazing scene, until he too began to cry.

Zeide's wail brought his father out of his trance. Aharon Leib approached and asked his son, "Michel, will you grow a beard?" In Soviet Russia, with an impending world war, where it was illegal to be a Jew, the unswerving Chossid was concerned that his son should look like a Jew.

Zeide Aharon Leib registered his son's Jewish name on official documents. When asked why he had submitted the Hebrew name Michel, as opposed to its Russian equivalent Michael, Aharon Leib replied "It should serve as a reminder that he is a Jew."

Zeide Aharon Leib died of starvation during the German onslaught of Leningrad. Some have said that he gave up his meager rations to other hungry Jews. However, while we may not know how he died, we do know how he lived. Zeide Aharon Leib would feed from his own kindness, even if it meant starving. Despite living in abject poverty, he was legendary for his passion of doing a favor for his fellow Jew.

On one occasion, a communist provoked Zeide by insulting his being Jewish. The consequences of reacting did not figure in Aharon Leib's judgement as much as defending his status as a Jew. He hit the scoffer, violently knocking him to the snow covered ground.

If it was illegal to practice Judaism, then Zeide Aharon Leib was a repeat offender. His son Michel was forced, as millions of children, to join the Pioneers, pledge himself to the motherland, and to his "father" Stalin. Once a child had joined the youth club, he was given a red tie as a sign of membership. Zeide Aharon Leib demanded of his juvenile son that he not wear the shameful neckwear, which he referred to as "rags."

When little Michel attended the next club meeting, he forced himself into the back of the room as to delay his turn in swearing to be a Pioneer. His teacher noticed the roving child and asked him to explain his behavior. Michel burst into tears and explained that he had to walk a great distance to take part in the communist meetings, and that he was afraid to wander alone.

The boy, heeding his father's earnest request, was excused from further attending the Pioneer convocations.

When he was a student in Poltova, Aharon Leib travelled to celebrate Purim at the festivities of the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe in Leningrad. After spending the holiday taking in the sights and sounds of the exultations and eruditions of the Rebbe, he was granted a private audience. The Rebbe asked his student if he had absorbed the Torah thoughts and insights which he had delivered, to which Aharon Leib replied that he had come to request a blessing. The Rebbe then said: "a Jew's blessings in general are significant. The blessings of a scholar are certainly considerable. The benediction of a son of holy and pure righteous men is then most extraordinary." The Rebbe went on to ask, "However, what is a blessing?" and continued, "A blessing is rain. If one properly sows and plows their field, it will bear good fruit . . ."

Aharon Leib was indeed blessed. He was married to Doba Raiza Raskin, the daughter of Shlomo and Chaya Basya Yente Raskin of Gorki. Together, they were blessed with four sons, Yechiel Michel, Sholom Ber (Berke), Chaim Dovid, and Benzion who continue to live by the examples set by their noble parents.

As war tore through Leningrad, Aharon Leib's wife took her three children to her parents in Gorki where she gave birth to Benzion. Aharon Leib was a reservist and died of hunger on the tenth day of Shevat, 1942.

Zeide Michel became his brother's surrogate father and was married to Dania Rubashkin in Brooklyn, New York in a ceremony officiated by the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Together with Bobba Doba, they raised and married off Zeide's three brothers. All became pillars of the community and have children and grandchildren serving as Chabad representatives and communal figures across the world.

# FURTHER READING

*One who quotes something in the name of its author brings  
redemption to the world*

*-Ethics of the Fathers chapter six*

My thanks to Rabbi Lazer Laine whose “Avnei Chein” served as a primary source for this composition.

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