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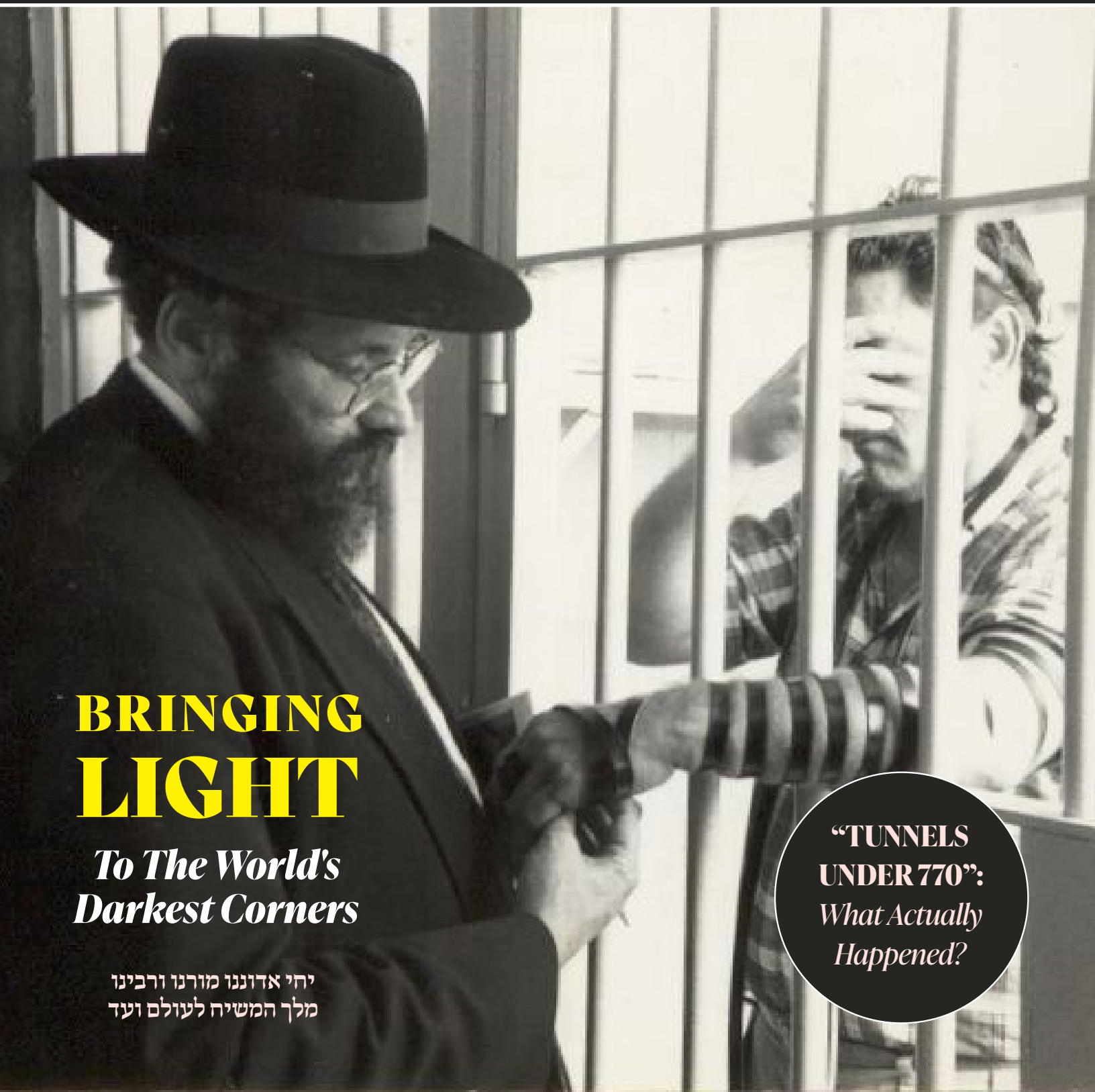
Weekly Roundup

THIS WEEK'S NEWS ON CHABAD.INFO

ב"ה

№ 12

FRIDAY, 17 TEVES 5784
PARSHAS VAYECHI



BRINGING LIGHT

*To The World's
Darkest Corners*

יהי אדוננו מורנו ורבינו
מלך המשיח לעולם ועד

**“TUNNELS
UNDER 770”:
What Actually
Happened?**

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Feature

Cover Photo: R' Sholom Lipskar putting on Tefillin with a Jewish inmate. Credit: Aleph Institute

CHABADINFO

Published by **ChabadInfo**.

A Division of Chabad World Center

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FROM THE REBBE'S PEN

A Sefer Is Better Than A Photocopy...

On 3 Kislev 5732 (1971), The gaba'im of the shul in 770 reported to the Rebbe that they intended to distribute photocopies of each week's "Chasidische Parsha" — the maamarim of Torah Ohr and Likkutei Torah — to be studied. The Rebbe responded with the following:



It would seem to be more appropriate that the *sefer* in its entirety should be made available (and distributed) for the following reasons:

1) It would amount to the same, if not less, expenses (and especially the hassle involved in weekly printing),

2) Sometimes, one needs to study parts of the book before or after that week's parsha to gain a better understanding,

3) A book is more dignified,

4) An actual sefer will address the concern that the *kuntres* will end up roaming around disrespectfully etc. after the Shabbos of the parsha being studied.

לכאורה מתאים יותר שיהי' (ויחלקו) הס' בשלמותו:

1) אותן ההוצאות ואולי עוד פחות (ובפרט - הטרחה), 2) לפעמים צ"ל עיון לפני"ז או לאחריו - להבנה יותר, 3) מכובד יותר, 4) בטל החשש שהקונ' וועט זיך וואלגערן כו' לאחר השבת דפ' הנלמדת

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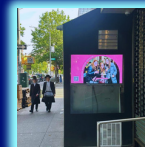
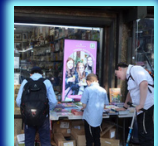
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Nittel Nacht, Chess in Beis Chayeinu

On Sunday night, as per the Minhag not to learn Torah on Nittel Nacht, many games of chess took place in the small Zal of 770, from children to Bochorim to Anash, and even some elder Chassidim, all are enjoying this yearly activity



Crown Heights Unites in Support of Eretz Yisroel

Anash and Temimim gathered in Beis Chayeinu for an emergency gathering on the eve of Asara B'Teves, as the ongoing war and emergency in Eretz Yisroel rages on. They rallied for the safety and security of the Jewish people in Eretz Yisroel with Torah, Tefillah and Tzedakah.





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RABBI BENJAMIN'S SHLOSHIM MARKED IN HIS HOMETOWN & OHOLEI TORAH

On Monday night, Vov Teves, Two mirroring Shloshim events took place in Memory of **Rabbi Shmuel Benjamin**, the legendary Mechanech and co-founder of KSCVK. One in his Hometown of Sydney, and the Second was at Oholei Torah, where he taught for over 25 years.

Originally from Sydney, Australia, Rabbi Benjamin went to Torah Or in Eretz Yisrael, and with the influence of Oholei Torah Talmidei Shluchim to Sydney, Australia he came to Lubavitch.

Rabbi Benjamin was a most devoted Mechanech of Oholei Torah Pre1A for twenty-five years, educating hundreds of Talmidim, imbuing a love of *Yiddishkeit*, and laying strong foundations for them during those formative years.

Sydney

The event in Sydney, took place at Tzemach Tzedek Community Centre in Sydney, NSW, for the Shloshim of **Rabbi Shmuel Benjamin**, the legendary Mechanech, a native of Sydney, who went on to teach at Oholei Torah for over 25 years and co-founded of KSCVK.

Mrs. **Filipa Benjamin**, Rabbi Benjamin's mother, shared inspiring memories of her son's life, the speech was later read at the event in Crown Heights.

The event featured speeches from close friends Mrs. **Cassy Nathan**, Mrs. **Chanie Amzalak**, and R' **Dovid Bleier**. As well as Rabbi **Avrohom Perlow**, Rov of Tzemach Tzemach Sydney.

The event was moderated by Rabbi **Yehuda Spielman**, the Shul's president and a close friend of Rabbi Benjamin. The Shloshim ceremony also included a special video presentation with cherished memories with Rabbi Benjamin.

Crown Heights

Over 800 Crown Heights residents packed the hall of Oholei Torah in Crown Heights, where he taught for over 25 years.

Rabbi **Yossi Katzman** moderated the event. During the event, a Siyum Mishnayos was held in honor of Rabbi Benjamin, by his talmid, Rabbi **Mendel Vilenkin**, followed by Kaddish.

Tehillim and 12 Pesukim were led by Rabbi Benjamin's talmidim, **Schneur Zalman Muchkin** and **Shmuel Glick** respectively.

The event was addressed by family and friends, Rabbi **Michael Chiriqui**, Rav of The Sephardi Synagogue and member of the Sydney Beth Din, who flew from Sydney, Australia for Shloshim in Crown Heights and Rabbi **Shalom Zirkind**, mashpia in Crown Heights.

Rabbi **Yossi Benjamin**, son of Rabbi Benjamin spoke a few words about his father, about how he was *Mechanech*, not just during the Cheder hours, but rather 24/7, always learning and teaching, worrying about and helping his students.

The staff of Oholei Torah addressed the crowd: Rabbi **Hershel Lustig**, Dean (who hired Rabbi Benjamin over 25 years ago); Rabbi **Mendel Blau**, Menahel Kloli; Rabbi **Meir Shimshoni**, principal of Grades Pre 1A, 1st & 2nd; Rabbi **Yossi Goldstein**, Pre 1A teacher, and Rabbi **Moshe Pape**, 2nd grade teacher.

The family would like to thank: Mr. **Benny Amzelak**, for organizing the event in Sydney and Rabbi Moshe Pape of Oholei Torah for organizing the event in Crown Heights. As well as Rabbi **Vely Karp** and Mrs. **Devi Baumgarten**, and the whole faculty and student body of Oholei Torah and the Anash community. And a special thank you to Rabbi Michael Chiriqui.

The Event in His Hometown of Sydney



The Event in Oholei Torah – Where he taught for over 25 years



“TUNNELS UNDER 770”: WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED?

In the past week, the most talked about event among Anash is “a tunnel that was discovered under 770”. With the backdrop of the current war in Gaza and the unending talk about Gaza’s tunnels, the rumor about the tunnels under Beis Chayeinu, and with different versions of events. Jokes began to appear on the one hand, and accusations and slanders on the other.

So what actually happened?

Chabadinfo reporters spoke to a number of *Askanim* and those in the know to put together things in order:

Several weeks ago, the Gabbaim of Beis Chayeinu learned about excavations under the nearby building, which is adjacent to the large Zal of 770 - the old Kollel and Mikvah building on the corner of Union Street, which is owned by the Guarary family. To clarify: this building is not owned by 770 and is not managed by the Gabbaim.

After the excavation came to light the Gabbaim responsibly carried out a series of actions: First, they called in a structural engineer to check whether there was any damage to the building of 770, and at the same time they informed the property owners about this. Second, as a precaution, the Kingston Ave. *Ezras Noshim* has been closed, as the excavation is below this area. Despite this, the excavations at the site continued, and when there

was no choice left, Shmira volunteers were brought in to put an end to it

Despite the rumor mill, it is not an excavation from the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, but rather more recent. These are several irresponsible individuals, who decided on their own—and without consulting or getting permission from anyone—that they are “expanding 770”, by entering from the old Union Street mikvah, and breaking the wall that separates it from the area below the Kingston Ave. *Ezras Noshim*. Unfortunately, the promiscuous “expansion” work has meanwhile caused Beis Chayeinu to be smaller, with the Kingston Ave. *Ezras Noshim* was closed, and in addition, the new extension that serves the temimim during the week was closed.

It has been confirmed to *Chabadinfo* that the excavation **does not pose a danger** to Building of 770, offices of 788, the large Zal, or other parts of the building.

The Gabbaim are awaiting the Results of the engineer’s test to reopen the *Ezras Noshim* on Kingston Ave.

In the days when the security of Yidden is in danger and the need for Ahavas Yisroel and unity is greater, it is a shame to spread Loshon Hara and slander and take advantage of this to settle an opinion.



Photo by Dov Ber Hechtman



BRINGING LIGHT

To The World's Darkest Corners

Last summer, Mendel Hecht and Moshe Wajsbort, under the directorship of the Aleph Institute, conducted a “tour” of Texas incarceration and correction facilities, bringing the light of Torah and Yiddishkeit to people who perhaps need it most

Every summer, bachurim travel around the United States to visit Jewish inmates in prisons. Coordinating and facilitating these visits is the Aleph Institute, the largest institution in America focused on advocating for and aiding Jewish inmates and military personnel.

This summer, the Rebbe MH”M sent us to Texas to visit Jewish inmates across the state, traveling throughout Dallas, Austin, Houston, and S. Antonio.

To obtain appropriate clearances for the various state, federal, and private prisons we intended to visit, we needed to complete numerous security forms well in advance of our trip. A few weeks later, we boarded our flights to Houston, where we bought kosher food for the next week, which would be a scarcity in some of Texas’ most remote areas. We booked our hotel, and the next morning we embarked on our mission.

Death Row

On our first day in Texas, we entered a maximum-security prison with some of the most notorious inmates in the country, including some on death row, one of whom we met.

Upon our arrival, the guard stationed at the entrance informed us that we could not visit until tomorrow when the prison would be open to visitors. When we insisted that we had an appointment set up, he gave us a phone number for inmate services and told us to reach out to them. We were nervous we would not be able to gain entry, and that we could not meet David, who had no more planned Aleph visits this summer. But we were prepared for situations like this, and thankfully, all we needed to do was mention the chaplain’s name, and baruch Hashem, we were in.

Every facility varies in terms of its security protocols, depending on the severity of the prisoners’ crimes. At this particular facility, our meeting took place across a glass partition equipped with two phones on the visitors’ side and one phone for the

inmate on their side.

When we met David, what deeply impressed me was the remarkable optimism he exuded, despite his circumstances. Despite being slated for execution later this year, he radiated a vibrant smile and expressed a profound gratitude throughout our visit. He shared how he utilized his time to engage in introspection and self-assessment, leading to a significant personal transformation. David shared his involvement in self-improvement programs and the meaningful relationships he had nurtured as well as his efforts to inspire others to make positive changes in their lives.

“He felt like a human being, a Jew, and part of a family which he has always longed for.”

He shared that there was one inmate who was legendary among the inmates for violently beating a guard to death. David made it his business to befriend and ultimately get this inmate out of “the Hole,” a solitary confinement cell where he was placed for punishment and safety purposes. It is a small room, and all food or books are given through a tiny hole on the bottom of the door. The toilet and bed are in the same room; it is a subhuman container. David told us that this inmate’s only free time was for playing basketball, thanks to David who had convinced the guards to let him join.

Since there was a thick glass window separating us, putting on tefillin was going to be a challenge. So, the chaplain brought the tefillin around to David and slid it beneath a small window, where David took it. For the first time ever, instead of just putting the tefillin on the person, we explained *how* to put on tefillin step by step. When he was done, we said *Shema* together. When we got up to *V’haya*, I asked if he’d like to say the whole thing, which I usually do not do, but I figured this might be his last time to wrap, so I asked. We said the whole *Shema* and then explained to him that before a person returns their *neshama* to Hashem, *Vidui* is said. Word for word, we said *Vidui* together, and when we were done, I briefly translated. We said goodbye and expressed our hope that next time we see him it would be with *Moshiach* in Yerushalayim.

Shortly after our visit, we received an anonymous message through our Aleph coordinator, Mendy Hendl:

“Hello Moshe and Mendel! I just received the most exciting and overwhelming phone call half an hour ago from the inmate, David - it was a beautiful surprise for him to receive the visit today at 12 PM. Additionally, he was amazed that we were all involved in facilitating his visit and trying our very best to give him an uplifting spiritual experience, especially when he was permitted to put on Tefillin too! The excitement in his voice was indescribable! He felt like a human being, a Jew, and part of a family which he has always longed for.”

Two months later, we learned that David had been executed since our visit. Though he has left this world, his mitzva remains etched into eternity. And though his actions had at one point led his life far from *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, David had strove to come closer in his final days, and we felt incredibly grateful that the Rebbe had sent us to this *neshama*, to give it her respite before returning to her Maker.

MBD Music in Prison

In our travels, we encountered all sorts of individuals - men and women, young people and elderly people, healthy people and ill people, with charges ranging from minor to major, both at state and federal levels, and across all security levels from minimum to maximum and everything in between.

One facility had such lax security, that one could simply open a door and walk out to freedom. However, the odds of getting caught were high, which would mean relocation to worse conditions and more time behind bars. Upon arrival at this location, we saw Josh ecstatically bouncing his head back and forth to Mordechai ben David’s music blasting across the room. We were pleasantly surprised to see he was able to play Jewish music here, and he told us, “Every Friday before Shabbos, I love to play Jewish music so all the goyim know how proud I am to be Jewish!” Even though it was during the “Nine Days,” he was so happy we did not want to dampen his spirits, and he eagerly shared the various interpretations he had encountered while learning *Chumash* and *Nach*.

Other institutions were not as inviting, where long grayish hallways lined the floors, and gigantic men with bulging muscles gawked at us behind black metal bars. More often than not, though, we received a positive greeting from the inmates with a cheerful remark like, “Hey, what’s up rabbis.”



Mendel and Moshe in front of a prison



One memorable personality was Sarah. She resided in a maximum-security medical facility, a place designated for individuals in need of serious medical attention. Although a high-security federal facility, the environment resembled a hospital more than a prison, with nurses, medical equipment, and wheelchairs dotting the corridors. Sarah, an elderly woman, spoke with a charmingly stereotypical Jewish kvetch, and she shared her observations about the goyim who “don’t quite understand me.” Her concerns and pains, both emotional and medical, struck a deep chord within me. Her most cherished wish was to reunite with her son, whom she had not seen since her imprisonment, as he, too, was incarcerated and could not visit. In a comically frustrated tone, she also mentioned that for twenty years, she had not had a salad, and that “All I want is some lettuce, cucumbers, and tomatoes!”

I could not help but feel a sense of strange gratitude for the George Foreman grill that we had been making grilled cheese sandwiches with at our hotel, and the skillet for eggs and chicken which provided our culinary luxuries. Despite the many smoke alarms we had triggered, and our subsequent make-shift transformation of a service room into a kitchen, I did not take for granted that our access to basic goods far outweighed life behind bars. Sarah’s plight resonated with me as I learned the full extent of Texas’ worst prison conditions.

In the next facility we visited, the prison guards forced us to wear body-armor protective vests. When the gentleman giving out the vests asked for what size, without blinking an eye, the chaplain answered for us, “Extra-large.” He said this would “protect our vitals,” even though our clothing sizes are medium and extra small. We were confused, however, because we would be walking near a high-security solitary confinement hall, where no prisoner could seemingly hurt us. So, why would we need vests at all? We learned from the chaplain that in the section we were about to enter, inmates sometimes threw sharp objects through little windows at the guards.

In this area, inmates atrophied in solitary confinement for years at a time. Some inmates even spent their entire sentences within 80 square feet, where psychological breakdown is inevitable. Most prisoners we interacted with in solitary confinement struggled to carry basic conversation, and I could not help but wonder where the balance lay between effective punishment and rehabilitation. Indeed, the Torah tells us to make cities of refuge for those who have committed manslaughter, but never does it prescribe incarceration as a form of punishment.

We know in Chassidus that no matter what, every person comes down to this world to fulfill a specific Divine purpose. Reflecting back, it is hard to understand how many of these individuals (who are certainly responsible for their crimes) have the opportunity to contribute toward their Divine mission again. As we tread across the prison’s dim hallways, we tried to speak with inmates as much as possible since human interaction is so rare and vital. Perhaps the one kind word they exchanged with us had been their entire life’s purpose, as the Baal Shem Tov similarly taught.

A Story of a Tzaddik, A Moment of Geula

Throughout our visits, our primary goal was to convey our genuine care for the prisoners we met and to provide them with a tangible connection to Yiddishkeit. For some inmates, this was their only opportunity to interact with fellow Jews throughout the year. Behind prison walls, surrounded by diverse demographic groups, feelings of spiritual isolation and loneliness were palpable.

My friend **Mendy Zwiebel**, an experienced Aleph volunteer with a rich history of participating in var-

“Upon arrival, we saw Josh ecstatically bouncing his head back and forth to Mordechai ben David’s music blasting across the room.”

ious Aleph activities, including numerous summer visits, suggested that we sing *niggunim* and farbreng with the inmates. As singing is not our strong suit, Moshe and I focused on the farbrengen aspect. During our visits, we engaged in a lot of listening, answering questions, and discussing various topics, including the concepts of *hashgacha pratit*, *mesirus nefesh*, the significance of the three weeks, and the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash. Most impor-

The Last Tefillin

One facility we visited was meant for the elderly and for people who suffer from dementia or Alzheimer’s. We met with an old man, Jacob, whose hands were shaking violently. We put on tefillin with him, listened, and spoke with him. Before we left Texas, we learned that Jacob was no longer with us, and my chavrusa Moshe shared with me that during that meeting, he felt an unexplainable spiritual energy. Thinking back, it is all at once sobering and fragile and painful that we put on tefillin with him for his very last time, shortly before he returned his *neshama* to Hashem.

tantly, we delved into discussions about Moshiach.

During our visits, we answered a wide range of questions. Some were deeply theological, such as pondering the purpose of our existence in this world, while others were more technical, like deciding which Jewish books and films to purchase given their expanded budget for religious items. As we were sometimes their only gateway to Jewish life, we also addressed very basic questions, like which prayers to say on Friday night, and we would open a siddur to educate them on the appropriate *tefillos*.

A significant portion of our visits was dedicated to active listening. We heard their stories about life in prison, including heart-wrenching narratives of desperate circumstances, childhood abuse and neglect, mentally challenged parents, and, most loudly, we saw the feelings of estrangement across their faces.

What could we possibly say to someone who faced challenges far more difficult than our own? The answer is simple: we listened. We asked open-ended, non-invasive questions, and we inquired about their families and experiences with Jewish life while growing up.

We also shared stories of hope and *hashgacha pratit*, which is itself a form of hope. We explained that while there are many things we may not fully understand, everything that Hashem does has a purpose; nothing is a mistake. He is carefully watching over everything and directing every creature in His universe. One story, in particular, was that of the Shpoler Zeide.

As he was leaving a town where he had stayed for Shabbos, a fellow traveler, with whom he had lodged at the same host, asked him to watch his bags, to which he willingly obliged. Almost immediately, the sounds of galloping horses could be heard, and a group of police officers checked everyone’s bags. It turned out that a thief had stolen precious items from the host’s home, and, to everyone’s surprise, these items were found in the possession of the Shpoler Zeide. He was then incarcerated, bewildered and wondering why Hashem had allowed this to happen to him.

While in prison, he met a young gypsy boy who was born as a Jew, but who had never learned about his Yiddishkeit. The Shpoler Zeide befriended and taught the boy, realizing that this unfortunate circumstance had a clear purpose, to bring the young boy closer to his Jewish heritage.

Since we were visiting around Chof Av, we also had meaningful discussions about Reb Levik and the tremendous *mesirus nefesh* he displayed to preserve the Jewish way of life in Yekaterinoslav. In Texas’ high-security prisons, many seemingly simple mitzvos require a significant degree of *mesirus nefesh*, and many inmates often skip meals because they cannot verify if the food is kosher.

Most importantly, we tried infusing our interactions with stories of *Geula* and open miracles, which remind us that beneath the reality we are used to experiencing, there lies infinite wonder. Miracles are those moments in time that step beyond the mundane and touch the *etzem ha’neshama* of a Yid, kindling the fire that has lain latent for so many years. The stories we shared gave a new and hopeful perspective to the prisoners we met, who lived in an

Continued from pg. 7

environment of doubled and redoubled darkness, where it is difficult to see Hashem's hand guiding one's life.

As the Rebbe told us over and over again, our personal *Geula* brings the collective *Geula*, and we saw the potency of this teaching manifest across our shlichus in Texas.

Excuse Me Sir, Are You Really Jewish?

For each facility, Aleph would consistently provide us with a list of confirmed Jewish names. They have a rigorous vetting process to ensure that everyone is a Yid *k'halacha*. Within the prison environment, being religious often holds certain conveniences, like during Pesach when identifying as Jewish could grant access to grape juice and extra food.

However, during our visits, we frequently encountered a most curious conundrum. Inmates shared that the chaplain allowed them to officially change their religion once a month, which meant that certain inmates would declare themselves Jewish during Pesach and be seasonal Christians or Muslims when it seemed suitable. Consequently, we had to exercise caution to verify the authenticity of an inmate's Jewishness.

One particular concern was the presence of "Jews for J" who always promptly showed up to our visits. We heard stories about complications arising from Messianic groups misusing resources and special foods designated for the Jewish inmates, as well as harassment to accept their flawed beliefs.

On one occasion, we received a list of two or three Jewish individuals to visit, but upon arrival, we found a large group waiting for us. We asked everyone to raise their hands if they were traditionally Jewish, and a mere two hands went up,



Mendel and Moshe doing mitvza Tefillin

while the majority identified as so-called "Messianic Jews".

Another time, we spent an hour with two women, and as time went on, something seemed off; as it turned out, they were both Messianic as well. This story kept on repeating itself again and again. Only after confirming inmates' mothers were born Jewish, we would offer them the opportunity to don tefillin and fulfill the mitzva of tzitzis. Almost everyone gladly participated, and our mission was clear: we aimed to make them feel like an integral part of Am Yisrael which they are.

Aleph Lends a Hand

We are just one component of Aleph's operations. Aleph offers an abundance of invaluable resources to both inmates and their families. Due to the limited exposure inmates have to Yiddishkeit, Aleph holds profound significance. From *The Liberator* magazine to Matza for Pesach, as well as supplies for other Yomim Tovim, two-week-long Yeshiva learning programs, and practical assistance through legal advocacy and sometimes even medical aid, Aleph provides comprehensive support. Furthermore, they assist inmates in reintegrating after their release, extend help to struggling families, facilitate facility transfers, and much more.

Each person we met with is their own world. And though he may have strayed, he is never estranged from *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. Throughout our interactions, we encouraged those we met with to continue learning about Yiddishkeit, to find the intrinsic goodness within others and oneself, and to stay hopeful for a brighter tomorrow, when the moon will shine like the sun and *Knesses Yisrael* will crown her King. Only the power of shlichus could have given us the fortitude in those somber cells, where we truly saw how a little light dispels much darkness.

**Note: Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of inmates referenced*

מזל טוב

THIS WEEK'S

MAZAL TOV

New Engagement

Yosef Faygen – Crown Heights to **Chana Pechenik** – Atlanta, GA

Abba Wolosow – Crown Heights to **Rochel Einbinder** – Tarzana, CA

Sasson Abada – Great Neck, NY to **Temima Feder** – Lawrence, NY

Avromi Vaisfiche – Melville, Long Island, NY to **Goldie Marasow** – Montreal, Canada

Shaya Sperlin – Crown Heights to **Rosa Wuensch** – Yerushalayim, Eretz Yisroel

Newborn

Baby girl to **Aharon and Mushky Gellis** – Crown Heights

Baby boy to **Shneur and Liba Nejar** – Crown Heights

Baby boy to **Shneur Zalman and Chana** (nee Abelsky) **Tiefenbrun** – Crown Heights

Baby Girl to **Yisrolik and Leah** (nee Zucker) **Shur** – Key Largo, FL

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