

Ladders of Life

I -- **Rabbi Shabtai Slavaticki*** -- first met 'Daniel' (name changed) at the Chabad House when someone brought him over for a visit. A tall young man, with a refined and intelligent face, he worked in computer operations for the European Common Market.

Sometimes it can take weeks, months, or even years until two people make a connection. Other times the connection is made instantly. It might have something to do with *gilgulim* (past lives) or the celestial source of souls. Whatever the case, we hit it off at once.

Daniel loved to learn and expressed interest in the deepest concepts in Chassidism. With his quick mind and unusual sensitivity he absorbed everything; he could bring the highest, most abstract concepts down into the practical and relate them to the world and people around him.

Most importantly, however, was the way Chassidism changed him. A new world had suddenly opened up. Daniel began to understand himself better and find answers to his questions. Within a short time he was wrapping *tefilin*, keeping kosher, and observing Shabbat.

Every few weeks Daniel would make a trip to Italy, especially on his time off. Whenever I asked him why, he answered, "To meet friends."

I always found something strange about this, or more accurately, I always read something between the lines. He never looked me in the face when he said it; rather he seemed to toss it in at the end of our conversation, as if wishing to relieve himself of a burden.

Once we were at the Chabad House until the middle of the night. A long *farbrengen* (Chassidic gathering) had just ended. Still under the spell of the *niggunim* (melodies) and the magic of the Chassidic stories, we found it difficult to get back to "real life."

It was then that Daniel approached me and opened up. "I think I'm a little tipsy," he began sheepishly.

"It's not the *mashkeh* (alcoholic drink), it's the *farbrengen* (chassidic gathering)," I explained. "A chassidic *farbrengen* is like a fiery furnace. It brings the inner Jew to a 'boil' so that all his external aspects evaporate and his innerness becomes more concentrated. After a *farbrengen*, we are more 'real.' Some people know what is required of them, but they're not sure 'where they're holding.' Others, however, have the merit to know both what they must do and where they're holding."

I could see that Daniel took the hint. He gave me a weak smile. “You already know,” he said, “that it's been awhile since I started becoming more observant, although everything is relative. Over the last few months I've severed all my ties to the past with the exception of one.”

He trembled and lowered his voice. “I just can't do it. If I take this step, it will tear me apart. Nothing of me will remain.”

I didn't ask him what the tie was; I knew it was something I shouldn't ask, something he had to tell me himself. Daniel was obviously uncomfortable. It seemed as if he was staring in the mirror for the first time and suddenly seeing himself as he really was, all the masks removed.

“My trips to Italy...” he finally mumbled, “I have a girlfriend there... but she isn't . . . one of us.”

He lapsed for a moment into silence. “Some of my friends have suggested she convert, but I don't think it would be right. Conversion is too holy to profane simply for the sake of my conscience. Anyway, I know that if someone converts to Judaism just to get married, it isn't a real conversion. So I've never even mentioned it to her.

“I went to a few different rabbis – specifically not Chabad – for help, and each one told me what a terrible sin it is to intermarry. Some of them even described the punishment in the afterlife that awaits someone like me, but nothing they said convinced me to break it off. I'm not sure I can do it.”

Daniel was trembling; I could sense the battle royal raging within. The look he gave me almost broke my heart. “Help me!” he seemed to be pleading wordlessly. “Save me from myself!”

“Your problem,” I slowly replied, “is universal, something we all face. It all goes back to the strangest *shidduch* (match) in the world: the ‘marriage’ between the body and the soul.

“The body and soul are essentially different, completely dissimilar in their likes, dislikes and loyalties. Yet not only do they have to live with one another, each one has to complete the other and make it whole. The funniest thing is, it works -- the greatest proof being that after 120 years, neither wants to be parted from the other. You are being pulled between the desires of the body and the desires of the soul.”

“What should I do?” Daniel cried out. “How can I get the power to free myself?”

“If a well runs dry,” I answered, “building a beautiful house on top of it won't help. The only solution is to dig deeper, all the way down to the water's source. You too must dig deeper until you reach your roots. There you will find the strength you need, as well as the answer to your questions.”

Daniel was puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“I mean it’s time to go to the Rebbe!”

By now I had his full attention. He no longer tense and desperate; rather, he waited, listening intently.

“**The Lubavitcher Rebbe,**” I explained, “is the source and ‘head’ of all souls in our generation. Go to the Rebbe; with him you will find your answers and the strength you need.”

I didn’t have to urge him further. A few days later Daniel was already at 770, standing in the long line for dollars. He waited there in excitement and trepidation for his very first *yeichidus* (private audience) with the Rebbe.

The line moved slowly as Daniel inched closer, all the while reciting Psalms. Up the stairs, turning the corner, approaching the door, finally Daniel finds himself face to face with the Rebbe.

“At first,” he told me afterward, “the only thing I could see was the Rebbe’s holy eyes. The Rebbe looked deep inside of me. All the words I’d prepared flew right out of my head. In the Rebbe’s presence, my mind stopped working; I felt completely exposed and transparent.

“I could not utter a sound. The Rebbe held out a dollar, but when I tried to take it, he would not let go. For a long moment we stood there like that, both of us holding opposite ends of the dollar bill. The whole time the Rebbe kept gazing at me, a look filled with kindness and love. I could feel myself calming down.”

Daniel blurted, “I have a problem.”

The Rebbe tilted his head slightly.

“I’ve started to become more observant,” Daniel explained, “but I have a girlfriend who isn’t Jewish and I’m planning on marrying her.”

Daniel braced himself for a rebuke. He expected to be reprimanded, to be told by the Rebbe how grave a transgression it was to intermarry. Surely, the Rebbe would say something about *Gan Eden* and *Gehinnom* (‘Heaven and Hell’), as did the non-Chabad rabbis Daniel had consulted.

But the Rebbe said nothing. His holy face was serious, yet there was an imperceptible smile on his lips.

“I envy you,” he finally said.

At first, Daniel could not grasp the meaning of this surprising response. The Rebbe, who is on the highest spiritual plane, is envious of me—someone on the lowest?

“I can’t remember the Rebbe's exact words,” Daniel told me, “but their meaning was indelibly marked on my soul.

“He said, ‘There are many ladders in life; the ladder is the individual’s free will. The Holy One, Blessed Be He, gives every person free will, which is a ladder reaching all the way to heaven.

“‘The test you are facing is a challenge. It will elevate you to the greatest heights. I personally,’ the Rebbe said, ‘have never been presented with this test.

“‘If G-d gives you a challenge, it means He believes you can overcome it. He is giving you the strength to withstand the test and to succeed.’ Only then did the Rebbe relinquish the dollar bill and allow me to take it.

“I’m not sure what happened next, but a few seconds later I found myself in a corner of 770 crying like a baby. I could feel the tears cleansing me, washing away all the dirt.

“Someone came over and gently asked me if I wanted a drink. Without awaiting a reply he handed me a bottle of water. I took a sip and felt better.

“I returned to Belgium and became another person entirely. My encounter with the Rebbe totally transformed my life.”

Daniel accepted the challenge. He ascended the ladder. Today, he lives as a full-fledged Jew in Eretz Yisroel, where is he raising a fine chasidic family.

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from a 2015 email of the Avner Institute (Rebbebook@gmail.com).

\* **Rabbi Shabtai Slavaticki** is the head Lubavitcher emissary in Belgium. He has a large congregation in Antwerp, where he is well-respected rabbinical figure.

*Connection:* Seasonal -- Shabbat, Tammuz 3, is the 25th *yahrzeit* of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe** מנחם: [11 Nissan 5662 - 3 Tammuz 5754 (April 1902 – June 1994 C.E.)], became the seventh Rebbe of the Chabad dynasty after his father-in-law’s passing on 10 Shvat 5710 (1950 C.E.). He is widely acknowledged as the greatest Jewish leader of the second half of the 20th century. Although a dominant scholar in both the revealed and hidden aspects of Torah and fluent in many languages and scientific subjects, the Rebbe is best known for his extraordinary love and concern for every Jew on the planet. His emissaries around the globe dedicated to strengthening Judaism number in the thousands. Hundreds of volumes of his teachings have been printed, as well as dozens of English renditions.