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From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles <editor@ascentofsafed.com>

The Purpose of Gold; the Power of Tanya

After his marriage, **Rabbi Meir-Shlomo Yanovsky** became one of the *yosvim* (lit. “sitters” – what today is called “learners in *Kollel*”) in the court of the fourth rebbe in the Chabad dynasty, the *Rebbe Maharash*, in Lubavitch, following the prevailing custom whereby a newly married young Chasid spent a year or so in the vicinity of the Rebbe, devoting himself totally to Torah study and prayer.

In the year 5650 (1890), his learned and well-known grandfather, Rabbi Avraham-David Levitt, passed away, leaving behind a letter addressed to the heads of the Jewish community in Nikolayev in which he requested that they appoint Rabbi Meir Shlomo as his successor, whom he had raised in his home after he was orphaned at a young age, and educated like his own son. The heads of the community were quick to fulfill their deceased Rabbi’s wish, and Rabbi Meir Shlomo was appointed Rabbi of Nikolayev.



Rabbi Meir Shlomo was noted for his great knowledge of Talmud and of Chasidut, his piety and his lofty character; like his illustrious grandfather, he was devoted to peace and shunned all honors. In addition, Rabbi Meir Shlomo had an excellent ear for music and was a talented singer of Chasidic tunes.

Rabbi Meir Shlomo and his wife Rabbetzin Rachel had four children, three daughters and a son: 1) Chana, 2) Gittel, 3) Ettel, and 4) Yisrael-Leib, who died of typhus at the age of fifteen.

The oldest daughter, Rebbetzin Chana, married the eminent scholar and kabbalist, Rabbi Levi-Yitzchak Schneerson. The second daughter, Rebbetzin Gittel, married Rabbi Shmuel Schneerson, brother of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak. This match was made with the approval of the fifth rebbe in the Chabad dynasty, the *Rebbe Rashab*, who stipulated that the two couples live in different cities.

Rabbi Shmuel eventually succeeded his father-in-law as the Rabbi of

Nikolayev. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak and Rebbetzin Chana, moved to Yekatrinoslav (today Dnipropetrovsk) where he was appointed Chief Rabbi. Shortly thereafter, their first child was born, Menachem Mendel, who, after the passing of his father-in-law, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef-Yitzchak Schneersohn (the *Rebbe Rayatz*), became the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe and the greatest leader of the Jewish people in the second half of the 20th century.

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In one of his talks, the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of blessed memory, related a famous utterance of his grandfather's. "My maternal grandfather, of blessed memory, was appointed to be Rabbi of Nikolayev after spending several years at the court of the Rebbe Maharash in Lubavitch. Shortly after he had assumed the position, he described to his congregation, not all of whom were chasidim, the Rebbe's aristocratic conduct and opulent life style – for instance, his clothing was made of the richest material, he had two gold watches, and many of his personal accessories were also made of gold.

One of the listeners voiced the doubt, "How is it that a Jew can permit himself such luxury; are we not still in exile? Surely it would be better for him to give his excess money to *tzedakah*, and live a frugal and austere life."

To this my grandfather replied, "Fool! Do you think that gold was created for the gentiles, or for ordinary folk like you and me? No! Gold was created only for use in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. With the Temple destroyed gold exists solely for the sake of the righteous, such as him."

The following two episodes illustrate the exceptional character of Rabbi Meir Shlomo.

Rebbetzin Chana told the following story about her father. "In addition to his brilliance in the study of Torah and Chasidut, my father was extremely pious and honest.

"Every year, before the festival of Sukkot, my father sold *etrogim*, to supplement the meager salary that he received as Rabbi. Whenever a customer would choose an *etrog*, my father would advise him to examine it carefully to make sure that it was *hadar* (beautiful, exemplary) that the top protuberance, the '*pitom*,' was whole, etc. As a result, many of his *etrogim* remained unsold."

Rabbi Meir Shlomo was once informed that his son-in-law, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, who was already living in Yekatrinoslav at the time, was confined to bed with a serious lung disease. Upon hearing the news, his face reddened and, standing with his right foot on a chair, he began to sing in a soft and extraordinarily sweet voice one of the wordless “Vallach” shepherds’ melodies, known today as “Reb Meir Shlomo’s *Niggun*.” Afterwards, he earnestly exclaimed, “If, G-d forbid, an evil decree has been passed upon him, I wish to exchange places with him.”

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Rabbi Mendel Futerfas, one of the dominant chasidim of the 20th century, occasionally told the following extraordinary story about the two good friends, Rabbi Meir Shlomo and Rabbi Asher Grossman, the *shochet* of Nikolayev.

The feast celebrating the circumcision of the Rebbe took place on a Monday, the fourth day of Passover, in the house of his grandfather. Reb Asher refused to eat any of the food that was set out on the table, because during Passover he never ate food that had not been prepared in his own home. Rabbi Meir Shlomo was upset by this and said to the *shochet*, “Asher! Truly, you deserve to be reprimanded. After all, in my house it is certainly permissible for you to eat. But what can I do? I cannot allow myself to rebuke you, since you saved my life once.”

Rabbi Meir Shlomo was referring to the period in his life when he had contracted typhus. At that time, there was no known cure for this disease. The customary procedure was to quarantine the victims in a sealed area outside of the city in order to prevent contagion. Except for a doctor who came once a day to dispense medicine, no one was permitted to enter the camp. Overwhelmed by suffering, abandoned and lonely, the sick lay on their beds and expired in droves.

When Rabbi Meir Shlomo was stricken with the dread disease, he too was taken away to this distant and forbidding place. There, he languished on a cot, helpless and virtually without hope.

When Reb Asher learned of his friend’s desperate situation, he took a copy of *Tanya* (the primary text of Chabad chasidut) and went to his building in the quarantined area. Forbidden to enter the sick man’s room, he stood outside as close to Meir Shlomo’s room as possible and read aloud to him the eleventh chapter of *Iggeret HaKodesh* (Tanya, book 4), in which it is explained: “...No evil descends from above, and everything is good. And when man will contemplate

his continually coming to exist truly every moment and absorbs this, how can he possibly think he has ever suffered, or had any afflictions relating to children, life and sustenance, or any other kind of worldly sufferings..”

Upon concluding his reading of the chapter, he closed the book and departed.

Reb Asher continued this routine every day for an entire month, despite not knowing if Meir Shlomo heard him or not; he just hoped. He would appear at the quarantine camp with the Tanya, read the chapter in a loud voice, and then go home.

This daily “injection” had its effect; Rabbi Meir Shlomo’s health gradually improved until he recovered completely. He later reported that each day after the Tanya reading, he felt himself becoming stronger and healthier.

Subsequently, when he was able to meet with Reb Asher, he called to him excitedly. “You saved my life! The reading of those holy words gave me the strength to overcome all the pain and depression, and I was able to overcome the illness!”

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*Source:* Compiled and adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles mainly from *A Mother in Israel*,<sup>1</sup> with supplementary information from *The WeeklyFarbrengen.com* and *Days in Chabad*.

*Connection:* Seasonal – yahrzeits (2)

**23 Elul 5779**, 82<sup>nd</sup> yahrzeit of Rabbi Meir-Shlomo Yanovsky, maternal grandfather of the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe.

**6 Tishrei 5780**, 45<sup>th</sup> yahrzeit of Rebbetzin Chana Shneerson, mother of the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe.

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Meir-Shlomo Yanovsky** [circa. 5620 – 24 Elul 5697 (circa. 1860 – Sept. 1937)] was the maternal grandson of Rabbi Avraham-David Levitt [5575 – 18 Adar 5650 (1815 –March 1890)], an illustrious Talmudic scholar and Chabad chasid, and maternal grandfather of the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi M. M. Shneerson, n’d. An excellent scholar of Talmud and Chasidut, he succeeded his grandfather as chief rabbi in Nikolayev in 1890.

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<sup>1</sup> The [first volume of the] English version of the Memoirs of the Rebbetzin Chana [Shneerson, mother of the Lubavitcher Rebbe], translated by Yerachmiel Tilles from the Hebrew version, *Eim b’Yisrael*, translated by Rabbi Alter-Eliyahu HaKohen Friedman from the Yiddish original.