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The Lubavitcher Rebbe's Rabbi

A little over twenty years ago a family in Tsfat had a new baby boy. The father of the baby decided to hold the *bris mila* [circumcision ceremony] in the town of the person who had facilitated his *teshuva* [return to traditional Judaism] process, a certain chasid, Rabbi F.S. from northern Israel, whom he would honor to be the *sandak* [the one holds on his knees the infant being circumcised] .

The night before the bris, still in Tsfat, the father and some friends gathered for a *farbrenge*, where the following story about F.S. was told.

In 1976 the Lubavitcher Rebbe launched a campaign that the *Tanya* should be printed wherever Jews live. The idea was to spread through the entire world the teachings of *chasidut*. Chasidim began printing editions of the Tanya in cities and towns and remote outposts all around the globe.¹

F.S. considered how he could get involved. He came up with the idea of printing the Tanya in pocket-sized format so it could be easily carried anywhere. This would surely add to the purification of the atmosphere of the world through the study of Tanya on trips and on the road.

F.S. decided to dedicate this edition to the Rebbe as a gift.

He first asked the Rebbe permission to follow through on his idea and he also offered to include notations on the pages following the daily study calendar . The Rebbe gave his approval to the printing but did not agree to have the notations inside the body of the work, saying it was not yet the time for this. ²

The main problem was preparing an edition that would fulfill opposing requirements; that it should be pocket-size while also having a large, clear print. After many attempts, he was successful. He sent the edition to the Rebbe and hoped to receive the Rebbe's blessing and encouragement, but he received no response at all. This distressed him greatly.

During this same time period, F.S., who had already committed himself to various penitential practices, decided also to begin a schedule of regular fast days. At first, he fasted on Mondays and Thursdays, but then he extended his fasting throughout the week. He ate only at night. This he did for ninety days!

That year, F.S. planned on traveling to the Rebbe. When he arrived at 770, he submitted a letter about his arrival and mentioned his fasting. Not even two hours

¹ As of Dec. 31, 2020, more than 7,500 editions of Tanya have been printed, from Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe.

² It was initiated in the 1980's.

went by and already Rabbi L. Groner [one of the Rebbe's secretariat] was looking for him. He had a response from the Rebbe:

“The directive of the ‘Alter Rebbe’ in *Igeres HaT’shuva* [Book 3 of *Tanya*] is known, that in our generations one should not fast etc., aside from the fasts we are obligated in, and especially as this is actually the practice of Chabad chasidim -- to conduct themselves this way. Therefore, you should immediately annul the aforementioned practice -- being that you have done it more than three times [and thus it has the binding power of a vow] -- with a Lubavitcher rav [rabbinical authority] and do as all Chabad chasidim do, and may *Hashem* [G-d Al-mighty] grant you success to serve him with joy, as per the teaching of the *Baal Shem Tov* [that the verse] “assist, you shall assist him” [Ex. 23:5] refers to the soul aiding the body. ³

F.S. asked R’ Groner what he should do. R’ Groner advised him to go to **Rabbi Zalman-Shimon Dworkin**’s home, as he was the official *rav* of Crown Heights, and he would be able to annul the vow aspect of his fasting.

F.S. went to R. Dworkin straightaway and told him what happened. R. Dworkin examined the Rebbe’s answer and said that he thought the Rebbe did not want him to cancel his vow retroactively but only henceforth. The fasts that he did until that point should remain in force.

R’ Dworkin called in two other men and in their presence asked him whether he would have fasted had he known that the Rebbe would be displeased. When F.S. responded ‘No,’ the rav said his vow was annulled from then on.

R’ Dworkin immediately got up and left the room. He soon returned with a plate of cake and a bottle of wine, and announced to F.S. to eat something and also drink some of the wine and say *l’chaim*.

After that, they got to talking and F.S. told him about printing the pocket-size edition of the *Tanya* and his tremendous disappointment about not receiving feedback from the Rebbe. R’ Dworkin smiled and said he had a story to tell:

A Jewish student in an American medical school became involved in Judaism and started living his life according to Torah. He exerted himself for four years and did well on his tests. He was then told that the last thing he had to do was an autopsy. If he did that successfully, he would receive his medical degree.

The student was a *Kohen* and remembered that *Kohanim* cannot come in contact with a dead body, so he did not know what to do about this final requirement; to refuse to do it would be for him a tremendous challenge. He didn’t know if he could stand up to it.

After making inquiries, he was told that the Lubavitcher Rebbe in Brooklyn was the one to consult. He sent the Rebbe a letter and the answer was to speak to R’ Dworkin. The student went to R’ Dworkin’s house and told him the situation. R’ Dworkin said, “You cannot dissect cadavers since you are a Kohen and Jewish Law forbids this.

³ See also Deut. 22:2: “Raise up, you shall raise it up”

Perhaps you should study dentistry instead. That way, you can receive your degree without having to perform a dissection.”

This was a tough decision for the student since it would entail another two years of study and tests. His parents did not understand his dilemma and were quite upset. “Are you crazy? After so many years of study, you won’t get your degree because you are a Kohen?”

The student eventually decided to do as R’ Dworkin suggested and switched to dental school at the same university. His father was wealthy and paid the tuition, even though he was still angry.

He spent the next two years studying and passed all the tests. However, shortly before receiving his degree, his professor told him that in order to graduate he had to perform an procedure on the mouth and jaw of a cadaver.

Once again, it was a cadaver and his career versus his Kohen status. The student wrote to the Rebbe again and again the Rebbe referred him to R’ Dworkin. He went to the rav and updated him on the return of this problem.

R’ Dworkin said, “You can’t handle the dead because Jewish Law forbids it. However, I have an idea for you. On the day that the graduation certificates are given, go to the dean’s office and even though he is not Jewish, tell him, ‘Out of all of the mass of humanity there is one special nation, the Jewish people. Among the Jewish people, there is one special tribe, the Kohen-priests. Jewish priests are not permitted to have contact with the dead. I am a member of the Jewish people and I am also a member of this special tribe of priests. Therefore, I cannot operate on the cadaver.’

“Tell him you studied medicine for six years and your test marks prove that you did well in both medical school and dental school. What you are missing is the procedure on the cadaver, which you cannot do. If he wishes to give you your degree without operating, fine; if not, not. Then turn around as though you are leaving.”

The student did what R’ Dworkin told him. He went to the dean and repeated the script. The dean said he could not give him his degree without the operation. When the student heard this, he turned around and began walking out.

A moment later, the dean called him back and said, “Okay, I’ll approve it,” and on the spot he signed both degrees, medical and dental. The student received two distinguished degrees instead of just the one he had hoped for!

About a month later, the new doctor called R’ Dworkin and said he was about to get married and he wanted R’ Dworkin to be the officiating rabbi at his wedding, as a sign of appreciation for his help and advice.

R’ Dworkin only officiated at weddings in Crown Heights but since he knew this young man, had guided him at major crises in his life and was impressed by his *mesirus nefesh*, his preparedness to give up his career and six invested years of hard study, he agreed to officiate.

The driver brought him to the exclusive Manhattan hotel, where everyone was waiting for his arrival. As soon as he arrived, the final arrangements for the marriage ceremony were made.

Suddenly a phone call came in from the Rebbe's secretary! He told the *chassan* (groom) that the Rebbe asked that they delay the ceremony a bit. He wanted to deliver a gift to the bride and groom, and the messenger already was on his way.

Out of respect for the Rebbe, everyone waited. The messenger arrived shortly and presented the groom with a pocket-sized *Tanya*, which he said the Rebbe requested that he hold the entire time while under the *chuppah*.

This *Tanya*, emphasized the messenger, in order to underscore its importance, was always kept in a drawer in the Rebbe's desk. Yet the Rebbe wished to give it to the *chassan* who had risked so much for his Kohen status.

When R' Dworkin finished telling F.S. this story, he surprised him by adding, "What do you think -- the Rebbe sent you to me just so I could annul your vow about fasting? The Rebbe wanted me to tell you this story I was personally witness to, so that you would know how much he valued the *Tanya* you published. Not only was it kept in the Rebbe's drawer but this was the gift that the Rebbe chose to give the bride and groom. Now you can be certain that your printing it gave the Rebbe much *nachas*."

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from an article in *Derher* magazine. The biographic note is excerpted from a multipage article on [//CrownHeights.info](http://CrownHeights.info).

*Connection:* Seasonal – Monday, Adar 17, is the 36th *yahrzeit* of Rabbi Dworkin.

*Biographic note:*

**Rabbi Zalman -Shimon Dworkin** [1901 – Saturday night, Adar 17, 1985] received *semicha*, rabbinic ordination, the world-famous Rogotchover Gaon, Reb Yosef Rozin. In 1953, Reb Zalman Shimon and his wife arrived in the United States and lived in Pittsburgh, In 1960, they moved to Brooklyn, where he subsequently served as the sole official rabbinical authority of the Crown Heights Chabad community for nearly twenty-five years, until his passing. Still today, many Lubavitcher rabbis throughout the world guide themselves with the *halachic* (Jewish Law) decisions that Reb Zalman Shimon issued. The Lubavitcher Rebbe would refer people with complicated *halachic* questions, as well as those with personal dilemmas that needed a bright and caring individual to assist them, to Reb Zalman Shimon. The Rebbe once declared in public, "He is my *Moro D'Asra*" (my Rav). A significant amount of his writings were published in "*Kovetz Razash*," including some of his stories of Chabad history in addition to a sampling of his *halachic* decisions and correspondence.