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From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles

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The Letter from an Orphan Janitor

There was a Jew named Yisroel who lived the last thirty-some years of his life in Israel, in the city of Bnei Brak, holding the same janitorial job throughout. He was a very simple, hardworking, genuine person, yet he never really was able to read Hebrew.

Born in the USA, Yisroel had a difficult childhood. When he was nine years old his father passed away. His mother, thinking that her child would hamper her chances of remarrying, put him into a Jewish orphanage.

The orphanage advertised that they were strictly religious and promised her that her child would not transgress the Shabbat. But they lied. They sensed that she wouldn't check up on him and soon poor little Yisroel found himself working seven days a week.

He felt that something was wrong, but because he was young, really hadn't received much of a Jewish education and was quiet by nature, he didn't make any problems. Instead, he suffered silently and prayed for some sort of miracle.

And that's what happened. One day when he was eleven or twelve, he saw a very impressive photo of an elderly bearded Jew in a newspaper, and below it was an article. The man, who was called **Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak**, was the **Lubavitcher Rebbe**. He had been in communist prison but now lived in Brooklyn, and he loved to help people and he made miracles.

Yisroel said to himself, 'He will understand me,' and decided to write him a letter. It took him a few days to get up the courage and, because he wasn't such a good writer, a few more to actually write it.

Then there were the problems of getting a stamp and envelope and putting the letter in a mailbox without being noticed. But his simple determination prevailed and finally he proudly managed to sneak it off in the post.

The letter began with his sad story and ended with a request for a blessing to not have to work on Shabbos, or even better yet, to get out of the place completely. But after three weeks of no reply he just gave a sigh, said to

himself, 'Looks like I won't get an answer,' and forgot about the entire incident.

Then, one morning...there is was! A letter from the Lubavitcher Rebbe...to him! A miracle letter!

First: it was the first letter he ever received in his life! Second: It was the first time anyone paid attention to him. Third: this great, holy Rabbi actually noticed him!

And two more miracles: no one intercepted and destroyed the letter he sent, and another that the same thing didn't happen to this letter he received.

He took the envelope to his room, closed the door, sat down, opened it and began to read.

The Rebbe wrote that he was happy to hear from him; that Jews must always be strong and proud to be G-d's people and that he shouldn't worry. Then he wished him *Mazal Tov* on his upcoming Bar-Mitzva (13th birthday when Jewish males must begin to do the Commandments) and assured him that when he began putting on *tefillin* (phylacteries), things would get better.

Sure enough, when Yisroel turned thirteen his mother bought him a pair of tefillin. A few weeks later the orphanage miraculously decided to find him a job 'outside' and, again miraculously, his new boss did not require him to work on Shabbat.

The Rebbe's blessings all came true and when he reached the age of fifteen he had saved enough to move out of the orphanage completely.

But he didn't forget the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak. As time passed he became more attached to him and his chasidim and by 1950 when the Rebbe passed away and was replaced by his dynamic son-in-law Rabbi Menachem Mendel, Yisroel despite his handicaps, considered himself to be a full-fledged Chabad chasid.

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But the new Chabad Rebbe was more demanding. He explained often and at great length deep existential and kabalistic concepts, such as how G-d creates all being constantly, the eternal uniqueness of the Jewish people and how the Torah is the blueprint of it all. But he always managed to put these ideas in a simple inspiring way.

For instance, how we can learn to serve G-d from electrical appliances. We are surrounded by electrical appliances: lights, ovens, telephones computers etc. that are activated by a completely invisible power; electricity. These appliances provide powerful and positive things as light, warmth, motion, and communication to benefit man. But only if we push the right button to turn them on.

Similarly, in each Jew (and each human) is an invisible power called the soul. This power, like electricity, is invisible, but it has the ability to illuminate, warm up and bring blessing and meaning to the world.

We only have to push the proper button; find a way to motivate each Jew. And when we do, we find that a little light and good pushes away much darkness and bad. We can stop the pain, suffering, war and ignorance in the world.

Yisroel took this idea seriously, as did all the other chasidim. Soon young men and newlywed couples began traveling throughout the world to spread the ideas of *chasidut*, but Yisroel didn't know what to do in order to participate in this mission.

He was very shy, spoke with a bit of a stutter, didn't have any talent for writing or teaching or much of anything else. He couldn't give charity because he didn't have any money. He tried to learn Torah but couldn't really concentrate for long. All he could do was be honest, nice and pray.

So he prayed for another miracle. And again it worked! He had a brainstorm.

The previous Rebbe had written three small booklets translated into English. Each contained forty-some pages of simple explanations on chasidic ideas about G-d, the Jews and Torah and other interesting things.

Yisroel bought three pamphlets, bound them together with a piece of cardboard, wrote on the cover: "Chasidut Chabad-Lubavitch", tucked it in his coat pocket and went to the Brooklyn Public Library. After strolling over to the 'Judaism' section, he took a book from the shelf, pretended to be reading it and then, when he was sure that no one was watching, put the book back on the shelf *with* his Chassidic creation next to it, and made his departure. (Something like how he secretly mailed that letter to the Rebbe).

He calmly left the library, looking straight ahead, feeling as though he had

just completed a mission-impossible espionage job! He had planted a seed of Judaism in the world, and prayed that it would bear fruit.

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One night, years later Yisroel was riding the subway home from work in an almost empty subway car. Only one other person was sitting there, reading his newspaper. Yisroel looked his way just as the other fellow also looked up from his paper and a conversation ensued.

Yisroel told him he lived in Crown Heights and was a Lubavitcher. The other fellow, also a Jew, replied that he lived in Monsey and although he wasn't a Chassid, Lubavitch made him religious.

His story was like this. He was not from an observant family, and until about five years ago knew almost nothing about Judaism. But then, one day he happened to be in the Brooklyn library looking for a book on Judaism when he noticed a strange booklet in the bookcase that seemed out of place. He took it out, saw it had a makeshift cardboard cover with a crudely handwritten title about *chasidut*, opened it up from curiosity and, although he didn't really understand much of what it said, he couldn't put it down!

It was something about chasidic Judaism and had a completely different angle on G-d, the Jewish people and the Torah. For the first time he saw that Judaism was something very deep and alive. That really got him interested and eventually made him an observant Jew.

So our Yisroel the janitor actually saw the fruits of his labors!

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the first-hand report of **Rabbi Tuvia Bolton** on his yeshiva website, *OhrTmimim.org*, who also wrote that with Yisroel he had “a deep brotherly connection.”

*Connection:* Tuesday night-Wednesday is Yud Sh'vat, the anniversary of the passing of the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe in 1950, and the anniversary of the *official* acceptance of his son-in-law to be 7th Rebbe in 1951.