

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

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The Isolation Seder of the Lubavitcher Rebbe *by Rabbi Pini Dunner*

One of the issues that has been coming up again and again in the past week [in March 2020] is the realization that people will be on their own for the Passover *Seder* this year, or their *Seder* will be drastically reduced in numbers, with children or parents elsewhere, all isolated in the midst of the current corona virus social-distancing self-quarantine situation which is so important to prevent the spread of the disease.

Some people even will literally be by themselves, solitary, with no one to do the *Seder* with at all. How can we do *Seder* by ourselves?" they ask me. "Doesn't the Pesach *Seder* need to be done with family and guests?"

In order to address everyone's concerns, I would like to share an extraordinary conversation with you that I had about eighteen months ago. I happened to be at the engagement party of the daughter of a friend of mine in Monsey, NY.

While I was at the party, I bumped into a friend of mine, **Rabbi Yosef-Yitzchak ("YY") Jacobson**, an internationally-known inspirational speaker. I knew that Rabbi Jacobson grew up in the Crown Heights, Brooklyn, Chabad community, just a few blocks away from the home of **the Lubavitcher Rebbe**.

There is an aspect of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's life that I feel is often overlooked, and we got to talking about it. The Rebbe was incredibly down-to-earth, and, together with his wife **Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka**, the Rebbe led a very simple life. Indeed, as hard as it may be to believe, their life together was very private.

Rabbi Jacobson often tells stories about the Rebbe when he speaks to audiences, so I asked him if he ever focuses on this particular aspect of the Rebbe's greatness. Namely that the Lubavitcher Rebbe avoided the pomp and ceremony that is often the hallmark of other Hasidic leaders and 'courts'; indeed, had no airs or distinguishing garments at all.

"For example," I asked Rabbi Jacobson, "do you ever tell audiences that in their sixty years of marriage, the Rebbe and his wife ate every Shabbos meal together on their own? No guests [except on very rare occasions], no attendants serving the food [except in the later years], no public spectacle... just a married couple eating together in privacy and harmony. A man who had literally tens of thousands of people at his beck-and-call! What a powerful lesson!"

Rabbi Jacobson thought for a moment, and then he smiled. “I’ve got one better for you... it’s a crazy story,” he said. “A few weeks ago, I led a workshop for single mothers, and at the end of the session, I took questions from the women and encouraged them to ask any question that was on their minds. One of the ladies put her hand up, and this is what she asked me.”

“A few months ago,’ she said, ‘it was Pesach. The thing is, my ex-husband and I went through a very difficult breakup. After years in court over our kids, we finally settled on a shared custody arrangement, which means that we alternate Jewish holidays. This past Pesach it was my turn – my children were coming to me for the *Seder* and I was so excited. I changed over my home for Pesach and prepared everything beautifully; it was going to be just me and the kids.

“I was so happy about them being with me, that I told everyone: my family, my friends, my neighbors. Then, one hour before the holiday, I got a phone call from my ex – for some reason, the kids were not going to be coming. I almost fainted from shock and heartache. I was also so ashamed. I guess I could have called my parents, or I could have called my neighbors – and gone to them for the *Seder*. But how could I actually do that? I had told everyone my kids were coming! Truth is, I did not have the energy to even be with anyone. I felt completely and totally numb – dry and lifeless.

“So I did the *Seder* by myself. On my own. It was the worst and most bitter *Seder* I have ever had. I just sat there crying the whole way through. Weeping. It wasn’t Pesach. It was *Tisha B’Av* [the saddest day of the Jewish year]. I did not have to eat the *Maror* [the bitter (horseradish and lettuce)]. I—my entire life!—was *Maror* bitter. Yes, I read through the *Haggadah* and ate the *Matzah*; but the entire *Seder* took me 25 minutes.’

“Rabbi Jacobson, did I do the right thing? Did I fulfill my *Seder* obligation? Was it even called a *Seder*? Because it did not feel like a proper Pesach.”

Rabbi Jacobson told me – and believe me, as a public speaker, I know exactly what he means – sometimes your most inspirational moments in a speech are not prepared. They are a gift from G-d. You can prepare for hours. And then inspiration drops into your lap. Right then and there, Rabbi YY had such a moment.

“Lady,” he said, “in 1988 the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s wife died, and he was left on his own, as they sadly had no children. She passed away in February, and two months later was Pesach. Every year the Rebbe and his Rebbetzin had *Seder* together, but this year he was on his own, totally by himself. With whom would the Rebbe conduct the Passover *Seder*?

“I recall that a young boy, Ari Halberstam – who was later tragically gunned down by terrorists on Brooklyn Bridge, in 1994 – approached the Rebbe after the Festival

Evening prayer on the first night of Pesach and, on behalf of his mother, invited the Rebbe to their home for *Seder*. Ari's family lived at 706 Eastern Parkway, just one block away from '770'. The Rebbe smiled at Ari, and shook his head. He thanked him profusely, but told Ari he would be having the *Seder* in his private office in '770'.

"I was a *yeshiva* student at the time," continued Rabbi Jacobson, "so I am a first-hand witness to this story. In fact, the Rebbe's longstanding assistant, Rabbi Leibel Groner, offered to stay with the Rebbe, but the Rebbe sent him home to have *Seder* with his wife and children.

"And so, the great Lubavitcher Rebbe – the man who inspired countless people around the world for their *Seders*, who personally undertook to provide a meaningful Pesach *Seder* for Israeli Army personnel who were on duty on the first night of Pesach via his *shluchim* [‘emissaries’] in Yisrael – had the *Seder* on his own. Not one other person was present. As the Talmud says, if you are alone, you ask yourself the Four Questions, and then you answer them to yourself.

"A few of us *yeshiva* boys did not go home that night; we waited outside in the street – and after a couple of hours, the Rebbe opened the door to welcome Elijah and recite the '*Shefoch Chamatcha*' [the paragraph that after the meal inaugurates the final section of the *Haggadah*]. He walked outside holding a candle and his *Haggadah*, said the prayer, gave us a wave, and then went back inside to finish the *Seder* — by himself.

"My dear lady," said Rabbi Jacobson, "if it was good enough for the Lubavitcher Rebbe to have the *Seder* on his own, trust me, your *Seder* was perfect!

"He could have had his *Seder* with 100 people, 1000 people, or 10,000 people. He personally arranged for all the army *Seders* in Israel to be sponsored. He was responsible for hundreds of thousands of people celebrating Pesach on *Seder* night, from Kathmandu to Alaska, from San Francisco to New Zealand. But at the end of the day, he went and did the *Seder* on his own. He didn't need anyone else to be close to G-d. He didn't need adulation. He didn't need validation. He sat alone and relived the Exodus from Egypt.

"I was only 15 at the time," concluded Rabbi Jacobson, "but despite my youth, I felt sad that the Rebbe had nobody to be with for the *Seder*. Why did he not invite even one person to be with him? But today, after hearing your story, I may have discovered the answer—although it is just a personal feeling. **As a true Jewish leader, the Rebbe wished to empower all those souls who would ever need to do their *Seder* alone.** He wanted them to know that their solitary Passover *Seder* was powerful, meaningful, and real. Jewish history and the Divine presence would dwell at their *Seder* just as it does at a *Seder* that has many people there."

Over the past couple of weeks [Feb. March 2020], as the corona virus crisis has unfolded across the world, and the reality of our isolated situations has become ever

more evident – this incredible and very moving story about the Lubavitcher Rebbe has been at the forefront of my mind.

This year [2020], so many people – probably more people than at any other time in Jewish history – will be having the *Seder* on their own or without their families. All of our *Seders* will be diminished, and anxiety will be hovering in the air. And all of us will be thinking to ourselves – ‘is this really a proper *Seder*?’

I think Rabbi Jacobson’s story about the Lubavitcher Rebbe in 1988 answers that question, and it eases any doubts we may have about our impending ‘depleted’ experience. After all, “if it was good enough for the Lubavitcher Rebbe to have the *Seder* on his own,* trust me, your *Seder* is going to be just perfect!

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Source: Excerpted and supplemented [in square [ ] brackets and end notes] by Yerachmiel Tilles from an article on *Arutz Sheva* in March 2020.

**Rabbi Pinchas Eliezer (‘Pini’) Dunner**, born in England, together with his wife Sabine, and their six children, have lived in the USA since 2011, where he is the Senior Rabbi of Beverly Hills Synagogue in California and also serves on the Executive Committee of the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA).

*Author’s note:* Many thanks to Rabbi YY Jacobson, who was kind enough to check through a draft of this article to ensure accuracy.

\* *Editor’s Note:* On his own, but not really alone. For sure he felt strongly the presence of his wife and his father-in-law (and perhaps also his other predecessors and maybe even his parents and other ancestors).

*Connections--Seasonal:* 1) Passover Seder with restricted number of guests;  
2) the anniversary of the birthday of the Lubvitcher Rebbe in 1902.

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe** ז"ל: [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.

