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The Singing Stutterer

It is always a special experience to hear **Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu Dan** from Paris when he leads the prayers. Each word has its suitable trill, no syllable is pronounced by habit. Those listening would never guess that the possessor of this melodious voice not so long ago stuttered and had difficulty to speak clearly.

To understand how this happened we have to go back to the beginning, over six decades ago.

Rabbi Dan's father was one of the survivors of the 1929 Arab pogrom in Hebron.* He left Israel as soon as he was old enough, and immigrated to France. There he married, but to the young couple's sorrow, they remained childless. When they finally accepted that there was no chance of their having children together, the wife, with great sacrifice, suggested to her husband that they get divorced and he marry her friend. In spite of the hardship they took this drastic step, and that is how Rabbi Dan's father came to marry Rabbi Dan's mother.

On the holiday of Shavuot in the year 1963, in the seventh month of her pregnancy, the expectant mother went to the chasidic synagogue in the Pletzel, the Jewish neighborhood in Paris. [In this synagogue **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** prayed during his stay in Paris in the beginning of the Second World War.]

After the prayer service a *farbrengen* (chasidic gathering) was held. During the farbrengen, one of the participants cried out very loudly, which shocked the young woman so much, to the extent that it caused the onset of birth pangs.

She was rushed to the hospital where several hours later she gave birth to a tiny, fragile, pre-mature baby boy.

Developing slowly, the baby stayed several months in the incubator under his parents worried and watchful eyes. When finally the *brit mila* (circumcision) could be performed the parents breathed a sigh of relief. Many of the Jews of the Jewish community in Paris rejoiced together with them.

* when Muslims slaughtered 67 (or 69 – Wiki) Jewish residents and yeshiva students with axes, hatchets and swords. Many dozens of others were seriously wounded or maimed.

The newborn was named **Shmuel-Eliyahu**.

When Shmuel Eliyahu reached the age of beginning to speak, it became clear that he stuttered. The doctors were of the opinion that this handicap was caused by the shock the mother experienced when in the synagogue. They had no cure for this congenital affliction.

The parents accepted the situation...but Shmuel Eliyahu did not! In spite of his severe handicap, or maybe because of it, Shmuel Eliyahu already as a child fell in love with songs and *chazanut* (cantorial music). He felt that he needed to find a way to overcome his difficulty with articulation.

Years went by. Shmuel Eliyahu studied in institutions whose interpretations of Torah, although genuine, were far removed from a chasidic way of life.

His connection with Chabad and especially with the Lubavitcher Rebbe came about through the Rebbe's emissary, **Rabbi Yaakov Biton**, from Sarcelles. It began with the wedding of Rabbi Biton. The two were already close friends and during the week before the wedding Shmuel Eliyah accompanied the groom everywhere [according to the Jewish custom that neither bride nor groom should go out alone during the week before the wedding[§]].

After the wedding and the following festive week, Rabbi Biton flew to New York to the Lubavitcher Rebbe. He suggested to Shmuel Eliyahu to join him.

"You will thank me for every moment you will spend in the presence of the Rebbe," he promised.

"And he was right," says Rabbi Dan today [2005].

"It was during the month of Tishrei 1987 that I arrived in Brooklyn to be near the Rebbe. I stayed in President Street. Close to me lived the musician brothers, Yossi and Avi Piamenta. A friendship was soon established between us. I loved spending time with them and enjoyed using my voice musically.

"It must be mentioned in their favor that they ignored my severe stuttering; instead they praised my vocal abilities. The openness and affection they showed me captured my heart.

[§] **Therefore, I dedicate this story to the memory and soul-elevation of** my very good friend whom I grew up with, **Zvi-Yehuda ben Yitzchak Elchanon & Esther Saks**, who loyally flew in from Costa Rica to be *my* "chaperone" during the week before my wedding. He also stayed a few days after, during which he helped me to *toivel* (immerse) all the new dishes, pots, and cutlery—an act which took us over an hour standing naked up to our waists in a men's mikveh, and which I am convinced had a significant influence on his soon after becoming mitzvah-observant! —Y.T.

"In their merit I started to believe more in myself. As is natural, I felt attracted to the world of those who embraced me with such kindness, the world of Chabad.

"The final stage of my entrance to the world of chasidut was on the night following Simchat Torah that month.

"As was his custom, the Rebbe poured wine from his cup *kos shel bracha* – "cup of blessing" to all those present, while all the chasidim stood around and sang enthusiastically. My friends told me that at this special occasion the Rebbe gives plentiful blessings to whomever asks.

"The truth is that I was extremely shy to speak to the Rebbe, but I decided that I owed this to myself. I needed to overcome the embarrassment and to ask for a blessing to be rid of the disturbing stuttering.

"I pushed my way into the line. When I was standing before the Rebbe, I took courage and asked for a blessing. The Rebbe's words, spoken amongst the tumult of the singing around him, astounded me with the divine spirit they revealed: "You will stop stuttering by means of singing."

"I left the shul shaking all over from emotion. How did the Rebbe know that I love to sing?

"From then on, adhering to the guidance of the Rebbe, I sang and sang at each opportunity. It wasn't a long time before the blessing of the Rebbe was realized: the stutter disappeared as if it had never been!"

With twinkling eyes Rabbi Dan concluded, "The greatest merit I experienced was once being *chazan* (cantor) in the Rebbe's *minyán*, in his presence.

"Every opportunity that comes my way I try to use my voice in order to gladden other Jews. I feel that in this manner I express my great gratitude to G-d for the miracle he made for me, through the blessing of the Rebbe."

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*Source:* Freely adapted and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from the first-draft translation by **C. R. Benami**, long-time editorial assistant for [www.AscentOfSafed.com](http://www.AscentOfSafed.com), of an article in *HaGeula* #1166.

*Connection:* This week's Torah Reading of *Shmot* tells us that Moses had a stuttering problem (Ex. 4:10).

*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 2nd 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.