



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

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A KEEPER OF THE ETERNAL FLAME

In Jerusalem, on a shelf in a closet in the house of Rabbi Yisrael Gliss, stands a tin pitcher that he received from his grandfather. Every year during Chanukah, the pitcher is placed in a prominent position on the table and Rabbi Gliss tells its story.

On the 29th of November in the year 1948, it was decided in the UN to end the British Mandate and divide the Land of Israel. The Arabs reacted with violent riots all over the country, and as a result the Old City of Jerusalem was under siege. The Jewish residents were terrified and exposed to shortages and hunger.

The Arab market that only a short time before was full of Jewish shoppers was now deserted. From time to time a British armored car would arrive from the new part of the city with medicines and food for the besieged Jewish populace. Several times some brave Jewish people broke into the deserted stores to find food, but this effort did little to relieve the hunger in the city.

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Reb Yonah Lippel, a devoted Breslav chasid, hid himself behind the *Aron HaKodesh* ("the Holy Ark"— a tall fancy cabinet where the Torah scrolls are kept). He looked cautiously over his shoulder, and only when he was sure that nobody was watching, did he take a small jar from his coat pocket. Carefully he brought it close to the opening of a tin pitcher and slowly poured its contents into it.

A trickle of oil poured into the pitcher and raised the level in it by about an inch (2.5 centimeters). Reb Yonah shook the jar, to make sure that not a drop of the precious oil would be lost. Then he carefully replaced the pitcher in a hiding place behind the Ark.

Reb Yonah was one of the keepers of the eternal flame that always burned in the *Tiferet Yisrael shul* (synagogue) of the chasidim in the old city. He always made sure that there was oil for lighting the flame so their light could spread in the "miniature temple" and enable the worshippers to pray to their Creator.

When the supply of oil in the shul ran out, Reb Yona started bringing oil from home. This was not a simple matter. Reb Yona had a family blessed with small children, and in times of hardship oil was a necessary yet difficult to obtain item.

Others were concerned with how they would survive and last out the day, but Reb Yona was made of sterner stuff; and he thought ahead. It was close to Chanukah. It was essential to prepare for the *mitzvah* of lighting the *Menorah* (Chanukah candelabrum).

He started saving drops of oil. Persistently, he collected one drop and another drop, hiding the treasured liquid behind the Aron HaKodesh. As the tension in the city grew, the Jewish people came to the synagogue to pray, to find solace and faith.

They would look at the eternal flame, and its small light was for them a symbol of the endurance of the Jewish people in spite of all the persecutions by their enemies.

The days of Chanukah arrived. In all the homes in the old city the *menorot* were taken out to make sure they were clean and polished, but instead of filling them with oil, tears fell on them. All were victims of hunger and who would dare dream of the luxury of oil for the *menorah* (candelabrum)?

“At least we will look at it,” parents told their children, “and remember the miracle of Chanukah. We will pray that there always will be the ‘victory of the few over the many, as in those days and in this time’¹.”

If at the start Reb Yonah had doubts whether it wasn't preferable to use the oil for nourishment for his children, as Chanukah came closer he was convinced that he did the right thing. "What are we and what is our life compared to the lights of Chanukah," he whispered to himself.

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On the eve of Chanukah Reb Yonah hurried to purify himself by going to the *mikvah* (ritual immersion pool) and hastened to get the menorah ready that would stand in the shul that evening, the first night of Chanukah. His face shined with joy. The people in shul looked at him in surprise; they wondered if he had lost his mind. What is this joy at a terrible time like this?

Before the afternoon prayer, Reb Yonah put the menorah in its regular place. At the end of the prayer there was a dismal atmosphere in the shul. Normally people would hurry home joyfully, with light steps to gather the family for the lighting of the Chanukah Menorah. Now there was no light and no festivity. With bowed heads the worshippers turned to leave the shul, each one to his home.

"Stop!" cried Reb Yonah. "Let us light the first light of Chanukah!"

¹ From the Chanukah addition to the thrice-daily 'Standing Prayer' (*Amidah*) and the "Blessings After Eating Bread".

Before anyone could open his mouth for a retort, Reb Yonah had rushed to the Aron HaKodesh, and in a moment reappeared with the pitcher of oil in his hand. "Let us light," he said delightedly with a wide smile, and quickly poured the oil into the menorah.

In his heart he prayed, "Master of the world, You know I didn't do this for my honor, but for Yours, to honor Your holiday and bring a little light to the depressed souls in this besieged city."

Reb Yonah honored **Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz** [leader of the Breslav chasidim in Jerusalem for the entire first half of the 20th century], to light the first light. The rumor of the menorah in the Breslav shul spread like wildfire. In no time the shul filled up with astonished people, all wanted to see the miracle with their own eyes. The singing of "*Hanerot Halalu*" (traditional Chanukah song sung loudly and joyfully shortly after the lighting) soon filled the shul, lifting the distressed hearts of all.

During all the eight days of Chanukah the lights burned in the shul, they radiated and lit up all hearts and inspired faith and trust in G-d's salvation.

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*Source:* Adapted, annotated and supplemented by R. Yerachmiel Tilles from the translation by Mrs. C.R. Benami, long-time editorial assistant for AscentOfSafed.com, from the popular Israeli weekly, *Sichat HaShavua* (#1565) based on a report from Rabbi Yisrael Gliss.

**Rabbi Avraham-Yisrael Gliss** is a tenth generation *Yerushalmi* (Jerusalem-born), and a journalist, author and lecturer, and a well-regarded expert on Jerusalem history.

*Why this week?* The first three Chanukah lightings are this week, on Wednesday and Thursday after sunset, and Friday before sunset.

*Biographic note:*

**Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz** (1862-1955) was a great-grandson of Reb Nosson (chief disciple of Rebbe Nachman). He arrived in Jerusalem's Old City in 1936, where he was quickly recognized as the outstanding Breslover elder of his generation. Among his disciples were a number of the major Breslover leaders of the past few decades, including... **Rabbi Gedaliah-Aharon Koenig** of blessed memory, founder and first leader of the Safed Bretzlov community. [From Breslov.com, as is the photo]