

**Rabbi Yissocher Frand**  
**Parshas Lech Lecha**

Chumras and Hidurim Were Luxuries That Avram Could Not Afford in Mitzrayim

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1310 – Giving Gifts to Non-Jews. Good Shabbos!

The pasuk says that on his way down to Mitzrayim, Avram realized that Sora was a beautiful woman. He was afraid that she would be desirable as a wife in Mitzrayim, and that he would be killed in order that Sora could be taken as someone else's wife. As we know, Avram said, "...Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me for your sake, and that I may live on account of you..." (Bereshis 12:13).

Rashi says on the words "so that it will be good for me" – this means that I will be given presents. Why Avram Avinu would be so interested in presents is itself a question, but a more pressing question is why Avram indeed accepted these presents from the Egyptians and, in fact, became a wealthy man because of them. Yet, shortly thereafter in the parsha, when Avram Avinu saved Lot, and the King of Sodom offered him the spoils of war, Avram refused to take them. "... I have raised my hand to Hashem, G-d, the Most High, Maker of heaven and earth, if so much as a thread or a shoelace, or if I shall take from anything that is yours! So you shall not say 'It is I who made Avram rich'" (Bereshis 14: 22-23). If Avram was worried about people saying that the King of Sodom made him rich, why wasn't he worried about people saying that the King of Mitzrayim made him rich? If Avram took into account the teaching of Shlomo Hamelech "...and the one who despises presents will live" (Mishlei 15:27) regarding Melech Sodom, why did Avram have such a sudden change of heart from his earlier ready acceptance of gifts?

There is an interesting Medrash that explains this contradiction and teaches a very important lesson. On the pasuk, "And he proceeded on his journeys..." (Bereshis 13:3), the Medrash Tanchuma notes that when Avram returned from Mitzrayim back to Eretz Canaan, he went to all the places that he visited on the way down to Mitzrayim, in order to pay his bills. Apparently, on the way down to Mitzrayim, Avram did not have money and he needed to borrow money to pay for his lodging and expenses. It was only on the way back from Mitzrayim that Avram had money to repay the debts that he had accumulated on the trip to Mitzrayim.

We derive two important lessons from this Medrash:

1. When people lend you money, pay them back. This may seem like an obvious statement, but unfortunately, this is not always done.
2. Do not be a tzadik on someone else's account. This means that it is fine to be righteous and have personal chumras (stringencies) and hidurim (ritual beautifications) if these chumras and hidurim only effect you. But if someone wants to practice exceptionally righteous religious behavior (for example, refusing to accept gifts because Shlomo Hamelech taught "the one who hates presents will live,") then he had better be certain that his personal piety is not causing the people to whom he is in debt to go unpaid. A person's fiscal responsibilities come first. Chumras and hidurim can only be built upon that baseline of integrity.

Avram in Mitzrayim had to tell Sarah "...in order that it will be good for me for your sake...". He was in debt at the time and he did not have the luxury of being concerned that people would be able to claim "It is because of me that Avram became rich." Later on in the parsha, Avram had prospered. By then he was "heavy with cattle, with silver and with gold." (Bereshis 13:2). By the time Avram went out to do battle for the King of Sodom, he was a wealthy man. Aha! A wealthy man has the ability and the luxury to be able to say "One who hates presents, he will live."

I can give a couple of examples of this principle of "Don't be a tzadik on someone else's cheshbon":

Rav Dovid Kronglas, zt"l, (1908-1972), the Mashgiach of Yeshivas Ner Israel, had a "chumrah" in shechitah, such that he did not eat beef. He thus had chicken for supper virtually every night. (There are fewer halachic issues with the ritual slaughter of birds than with animals). However, this is not a stringency that he imposed on his wife and children. His family ate meat. He was not going to restrict the members of his family from meatballs, hamburgers, roast, or steak because he accepted certain halachic stringencies upon himself.

Another example of not imposing personal chumras on others is evident in a story told over by the Tolner Rebbe. A young Kollel student came to Rav Schach, zt"l, and complained to him that his Rosh Kollel told him that he should not learn so late at night. Rav Schach told the young student to have his Rosh Kollel come see him. The Rosh Kollel came to visit Rav Schach, who asked him about the instructions he gave to his young Kollel student.

The Rosh Kollel said, "This young man has recently been looking unhappy – worried and perturbed about something. I asked him what was wrong. He explained that his wife got a new job, for which she needs to leave the house very early. She needs to get up even earlier to make the children's lunches and get them off to school. She is not getting enough sleep because she needs to get up so early. She is therefore not in a very good mood, and it is affecting their shalom bayis (marital harmony).

The Rosh Kollel asked his student, "So why don't you get up early and help make the lunches and get the children off to school?" The student gave as an excuse the fact that he stayed up learning late at night. The Rosh Kollel advised him: Don't learn so late at night, go to sleep earlier, and get up earlier so you can help your wife make the lunches and get the children off to school. That was "the story behind the story."

Rav Schach then called the young man back in and told him "Your Rosh Kollel is 100% correct. If you want to learn late at night, that is all fine and good. But if that negatively affects your wife, you cannot do that. You are a baal chov (in debt) to her. When you gave your wife her kesuvah, you pledged to support her in the custom of all Jewish men. She is supporting you! For that, she gets a great blessing. But you owe her. You can't be a tzadik on her cheshbon. If you are learning so late that it prevents you from getting up early to help your wife, then don't stay up so late! You have a primary obligation, and that primary obligation is to help your wife.

Hashem Said to His World "Enough"

The Beis HaLevi (Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik, (1820-1892)) notes that when Avraham Avinu received the mitzvah of milah in this week's parsha, it is the first mention of the name Sha-k-ai (Shin, Daled, Yud) of the Almighty in the Torah. HaKadosh Baruch Hu told Avraham, "I am Kel Sha-k-ai, walk before Me and be perfect." (Bereshis 17:1).

What is the specific connection between the Name Sha-k-ai and the mitzvah of milah? The Beis Halevi says that the connotation of the name Shin-Daled-Yud is that "I am the One who said to the world 'Dai' (Enough)". This name indicates that the Ribono shel Olam put the brakes, so to speak, on the act of creation.

The Medrash elaborates: Ma'aseh Bereshis (the Story of Creation) was an ongoing process. Had it not been for the fact that at a certain point, Hashem said to the world "Enough" (Dai – Daled, Yud), the process of creation would have continued. As a result, instead of going out into the field to harvest bushels of wheat, a person would go out into the field and harvest loaves of bread. The seed would not only produce the wheat, but creation would continue and the wheat would independently go on to produce bread and other edible products. Likewise, creation would not stop with just flax and linen, but rather suits and ready-made garments of all sizes would be "manufactured".

The Ribono shel Olam said, "No. That is not the way I want My world to work. I am the One who said to My world 'Dai – Enough!' because I want

to leave something for man to do.” This, says the Beis Halevi, is why the mitzvah of milah appears with the Divine Name of Sha-k-ai. As the Medrash relates, the wicked Turnus Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva, “If Hashem wanted man to be circumcised, why was he born with foreskin – why weren’t we all born already circumcised?” The answer to that question is that Hashem wants us to perfect ourselves. We are not born perfect. No one comes into this world as a finished product. Man’s charge in this world is to perfect himself. This is the underlying message of the mitzvah of milah.

When I was once in England, Dayan Chanoch Ehrentreu (Av Beis Din of the London Beis Din (1932-2022)) told me a beautiful thought from his predecessor on the London Beis Din, Dayan Morris Swift (1907-1983): We put a mezuzah on our door containing the Torah chapters: Shema Yisrael and V’haya Im Shamo. However, we do not see those chapters. The parchment is rolled up so it is impossible to see what is written inside. The only part of the mezuzah that we see is the outside of the mezuzah’s parchment where the name Shin Daled Yud is written. Dayan Swift said that the message is “I am the one who said to My world ‘Enough!’” Just as at the time of the original creation, Hashem said, “I am going to create the world but I am going to leave something ‘left over’ for man to complete”, so too, each man’s creation is ‘incomplete,’ leaving over the removal of the foreskin as a covenantal task for man to thereby improve himself.

And in the spirit of havei domeh lo (man ‘imitating’ G-d’s Actions), man too, in his own “Home Improvement” projects, does not need to complete every last detail, by building the greatest palace in the world. The message of Shin-Daled-Yud is He who said to His world ‘Enough’ – so too, we need to say to our interior decorator “My ‘world’ is also ‘enough’”.

I told my handyman “We need a new shower rod” (because our old shower rod keeps falling down). He sent me the links to Home Depot shower rods. It is incredible how many different types and prices of shower rods there are. I am not even talking about the shower curtains. I am merely speaking of the shower rods! Chrome, brush nickel, this and that. Enough! There is a boundary.

That is why the part of the mezuzah that is visible is Shin-Daled-Yud: I am the One who said to My world ‘Enough’.

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### **Chief Rabbi Mirvis Lech Lecha**

Noach When people curse those who bless them...  
Sometimes people curse those who bless them. This is a message that emerges from the beginning of Parshat Lech Lecha.

Hashem conveys to Avraham the significance of his future generations, saying, “Va'avarechah mevarecheicha” – I will bless those who bless you, “umekallelcha a'or” – I will curse those who curse you, and “venivrechu vecha kol mishpechot ha'adamah” – and all families on earth will be blessed through you. This prompts a crucial question: if every family on earth is blessed through the existence of the Jewish people, why do some still choose to curse us? In Sefer Mayana Shel Torah, it is noted that sometimes people are in denial regarding those who bring them blessings.

Or, sometimes they recognise it, but out of the hatred that’s burning in their hearts, they only seek our downfall, even though they benefit from us daily. That is what Hashem is saying to Avraham. The Jewish people will be a blessing for all civilization, but that won’t stop anti-Jewish sentiment from existing. This phenomenon is not limited to the Jewish people; it also applies to the State of Israel. Israel has given the world remarkable innovations, from advancements in technology to improvements in healthcare. Israel is a blessing to all of humankind.

Yet, even with these contributions, many do not recognise them and some still harbour an anti-Israel bias. Hashem’s message to Avraham is clear: regardless of how our actions are perceived, we must continue to shed the

proper light in this world. Sunshine produces light but can also create shade. In the midst of darkness, the sun continues to shine.

This is Hashem’s enduring message to the Jewish people: regardless of the way that people view you, nonetheless, always be true to the mission that I give you to shed light within our fragile world. Shabbat Shalom

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### **Drasha By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky**

Parshas Lech Lecha  
Suicide Moms

For the last seven years, I have patterned this d’var Torah in a standard way. I quote a verse, ask a question and then relate a story. I then conclude by explaining my answer to the Biblical question, hoping that the story I related has some enlightening or plausible connection.

In the topsy-turvy world we live in, I’d like to do something different this week. I’d like to relate a few stories first, ask a question on the almost incomprehensible stories, and then relate a verse from the Torah, with the hope that the Torah’s prescience will help us to in some way understand them.

Hussein Nasr was a failed suicide bomber. He plowed an explosive-laden truck into an Israel army post. He wanted to kill himself along with as many Israeli soldiers as possible. He was only partially successful in his mission, as the only one blown to bits by his evil scheme was he himself. Like proud relatives filming a family simcha (happy occasion), the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) took a video of his truck plowing into the Israeli post. Until Nasr’s 71-year-old father, Hassan, heard of his son’s actions, he said that he had no idea his son belonged to Hamas. But when he heard about the attack on Israeli radio, he declared, “I am proud of him. The whole world is proud of him. Even the land is proud of him here,” he said.

Here’s another story, that defines a new level of chutzpah.

The proud mother of Iman Atalalla, who killed Israeli soldiers by detonating a bomb-laden car, submitted forms requesting welfare

payments of \$150 a month through the Islamic Rescue Committee — regarded in Israel as a Hamas fund-raising group. On the welfare application, the bomber’s family wrote: “Died: September 12 1993; Place: Gaza; Circumstances of incident: suicide mission in booby-trapped car.”

The terrorist was single, aged 20, and came from a family of nine. The family called Atalalla “polite and moral,” and said he “fasted Mondays and Thursdays, prayed and read Koran.” Describing his attack that killed two Israeli soldiers, the report said: “When ‘his prey’ approached he switched on the ignition, approached the enemy’s vehicle and set off explosives, which sent a male and female soldier to [their deaths, and] the shahid (martyr) went to Paradise.”

Finally, from The New York Times this past Sunday, 10/21/2001: “I named my son Osama, because I want to make him a mujahid. Right now there is war, but he is a child. When he is a young man, there might be war again, and I will prepare him for that war. I will sacrifice my son, and I don’t care if he is my most beloved thing. For all of my six sons, I wanted them to be mujahedeen. If they get killed it is nothing. This world is very short.”

The question is simple. Where does such moral depravity come from? How is it possible that parents consider their progeny heroes for blowing themselves up while killing others? How is it humanly possible for a mother and a father to be proud parents of monsters?

In this week's portion, Hagar, Avram's maidservant, is driven from his home by Avram's wife, Sara. As Hagar wanders the desert, she is found by an angel who approaches her at a wellspring.

The angel prophesies, "Behold, you will conceive, and give birth to a son; you shall name him Ishmael, for Hashem has heard your prayer. And he shall be a wild man – his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and over all his brothers shall he dwell." (Genesis 16:11-12) Powerful words. Predictions of a fate that dooms Ishmael to a violent life, one that the commentaries interpret as "Ishmael being a highwayman and bandit, everyone will hate him, fear him, and battle him." Yet Hagar's response to this bestowing is as incomprehensibly baffling. She lauds the angel and "she called the Name of Hashem Who spoke to her 'You are the G-d of Vision.'" (Genesis 16:13).

Imagine. Hagar is told that her son will be a wild man who attacks and terrorizes, yet she does not protest nor pray that his fate should be altered. Rather, she responds with praise and exaltation for a "G-d of Vision." It sounds like she is content, even proud, and frankly I just don't get it. And though I'm clueless about Hagar's attitude, perhaps now I know why so many of her descendants don't think much differently.

It is obvious that not all of them do, of course. Everyone controls his or her own destiny. But maybe there is a national predisposition to violence. Maybe these parents are genetically infused with pride, knowing that the promise to their forebear has borne its rotten fruit. The values imparted from a nomadic matriarch have been transmitted like a deadly virus to her grandchildren, and Hagar's satisfaction is now theirs.

So this misplaced pride is not a new story. It's 3000 years old. And if you don't believe me, you can look it up.

This week's e-mail Drasha is dedicated in memory of Rav Michael Ben Eliezer Fuld Z"L, who passed away on 7 MarCheshvan 5755, who brought his sons closer to Torah by being an excellent example and treating them to a wonderful education at the Yeshiva of South Shore.

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## **The Power of Example**

### **Lech Lecha**

### **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**

So familiar are we with the story of Abraham that we do not always stop to think about what a strange turn it is in the biblical narrative. If we fail to understand this, though, we may fail to understand the very nature of Jewish identity itself.

Here is the problem: Until now the Torah has been concerned with humanity as a whole. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel are human archetypes. The former represent the tensions between husband and wife, the latter the rivalry between siblings. Both are stories about individuals and both end tragically, the first with paradise lost, the second with bloodshed, fratricide and death.

Then comes another pair of stories – the Flood and the building of Babel – this time about society as a whole. Each is about the tension between freedom and order. The Flood is about a world where freedom (violence, lawlessness, "everyone doing what was right in their own eyes") destroys order. Babel is about a world where order (the imperialist imposition of a single language on conquered peoples) destroys freedom.

All four narratives are about the human condition as such. Their message is universal and eternal, as befits a book about God who is universal and eternal. God as He appears in the first eleven chapters of Genesis is the God who created the universe, made all humanity in His image, blessed the first humans, and who - after the Flood - made a covenant with all humankind. The God of the universe is the universal God.

Why then does the entire story shift in Genesis 12? From here onward it is no longer about humanity as a whole but about one man (Abraham), one woman (Sarah), and their children, who - by the time of the book of Exodus - have become a large and significant people, but still no more than one nation among many.

What is happening here? Does God lose interest in everyone else? That surely cannot be the case. At the end of Genesis, Joseph says to his brothers:

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

Gen 50:20

It may be that the phrase "many lives" means no more than the lives of his own family (so Targum Yonatan understands it). But the plain sense of the phrase *am rav*, "a great people," suggests Egypt. Not until Exodus are the Israelites called *am*, a people. Joseph is saying that God sent him not merely to save his family from famine, but also the Egyptian people.

That too is the point of the book of Jonah. Jonah is sent to Nineveh, the Assyrian city, to persuade the people to repent and thus avoid their own destruction. In its closing words God says to the prophet:

"Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left?"

Jonah 4:11 (and see Malbim ad loc.)

God is concerned not only with Israel but with the Assyrians, despite the fact that they would become Israel's enemies, eventually conquering the northern kingdom of Israel itself.

Amos famously says that God not only brought the Israelites from Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir (Amos 9:7). Isaiah even prophesies a time when the Egyptians will worship God, and He will rescue them from oppression as he once rescued Israel (Isaiah 19:20-21). So it is not that God loses interest in humanity as a whole. He feeds the world. He sustains all life. He is involved in the history of all nations. He is the God of all people. Why then the narrowing of focus from the universal human condition to the story of one family?

The philosopher Avishai Margalit, in his book *The Ethics of Memory*, talks about two ways of thinking: "i.e." and "e.g." The former speaks of general principles, the latter of compelling examples. It's one thing to talk about general principles of leadership, for instance – think ahead, motivate, set clear goals and so on. It's another thing altogether to tell the story of actual leaders, the ones who succeeded, the role-models. It is their lives, their careers, their examples, that illustrate the general principles and how they work in practice.

Principles are important. They set the parameters. They define the subject. But without vivid examples, principles are often too vague to instruct and inspire. Try explaining the general principles of Impressionism to someone who knows nothing about art, without showing them an Impressionist painting. They may understand the words you use, but these will mean nothing until you show them an example.

That, it seems, is what the Torah is doing when it shifts focus from humanity as a whole to Abraham in particular. The story of humanity from Adam to Noah tells us that people do not naturally live as God would wish them to live. They eat forbidden fruit and kill one another. So after the Flood, God becomes not only a Creator but also a teacher. He instructs humanity, and does so in two ways: i.e. and e.g. He sets out general rules – the covenant with Noah – and then He chooses an example, Abraham and his family. They are to become role-models, compelling examples, of

what it means to live closely and faithfully in the presence of God, not for their sake alone but for the sake of humanity as a whole.

That is why five times in Genesis the patriarchs are told:

“Through you all the families, or all the nations, of the earth will be blessed.”

Gen. 12:2, Gen. 18:18, Gen. 22:18, Gen. 26:4, Gen. 28:14

And people recognise this. In Genesis, Malkizedek says about Abraham, “Praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand” (Gen. 14:20). Avimelech, king of Gerar, says about him, “God is with you in everything you do” (Gen. 21:22). The Hittites say to him, “You are a prince of God in our midst” (Gen. 23:6). Abraham is recognised as a man of God by his contemporaries, even though they are not a part of his specific covenant.

The same is true of Joseph, the only member of Abraham’s family in Genesis whose life among the gentiles is described in detail. He is constantly reminding those with whom he interacts about God.

When Potiphar’s wife tries to seduce him he says:

“How could I do such a great wrong? It would be a sin before God!”

Gen. 39:9

To the butler and baker, whose dreams he is about to explain, Joseph says:

“Interpretations belong to God.”

Gen. 40:8

When he is brought before Pharaoh to interpret his dreams, he says:

“God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.”

Gen. 41:16

Pharaoh himself says of Joseph:

“Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?”

Gen. 41:38

Jews are not called on to be Jews for the sake of Jews alone. They are called on to be a living, vivid, persuasive example of what it is to live by the will of God, so that others too come to recognise God and serve Him, each in their own way, within the parameters of the general principles of the covenant with Noah. The laws of Noah are the “i.e.”. The history of the Jews is the “e.g.”.

Jews are not called on to convert the world to Judaism. There are other ways of serving God. Malkizedek, Abraham’s contemporary, is called, “a Priest of God Most High” (Gen. 14:18).

Malachi says a day will come when God’s name “will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets” (Mal. 1:11). The prophets foresee a day when “God will be King over all the earth” (Zechariah 14:9) without everyone converting to Judaism.

We are not called on to convert humanity but we are called on to inspire humanity by being compelling role-models of what it is to live, humbly, modestly but unshakably in the presence of God, as His servants, His witnesses, His ambassadors – and this, not for our sake but for the sake of humanity as a whole.

It sometimes seems to me that we are in danger of forgetting this. To many Jews, we are merely one ethnic group among many, Israel is one nation-state among many, and God is something we talk about only among ourselves if at all. There was recently a television documentary about one

British Jewish community. A non-Jewish journalist, reviewing the programme, remarked on what seemed to her a strange fact that the Jews she encountered never seemed to talk about their relationship with God. Instead they talked about their relationship with other Jews. That too is a way of forgetting who we are and why.

To be a Jew is to be one of God’s ambassadors to the world, for the sake of being a blessing to the world, and that necessarily means engaging with the world, acting in such a way as to inspire others as Abraham and Joseph inspired their contemporaries. That is the challenge to which Abraham was summoned at the beginning of this week’s Parsha. It remains our challenge today.

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## Natural Faith and the Cause of Disbelief Revivim

Humans naturally believe \* If one explains faith incorrectly, questions will arise \* As faith becomes freed from the limited explanations that sufficed for previous generations, faith will return to pulse in people’s consciousness \* The trait of humility is essential for absorbing faith \* Since Jewish faith manifests in all areas of life, it is a commandment to establish it in three circles that encompass human life: in consciousness, in emotion, and in life as a whole

### The Foundation of Faith

Faith in God is a foundational assumption in Jewish tradition, and therefore the Prophets and Sages did not try to prove it, but only to explain its meaning and concepts. This is because as faith is explained and revealed in all areas of life, the consciousness of faith becomes stronger in intellect, emotion, and life as a whole. One can say that humans naturally believe, but if they explain faith incorrectly, such as describing God in physical and limited terms, questions will arise, such as: How is it possible that God who is perfect has deficiencies, and how is it possible that God who is good, does evil? As such questions strengthen in one’s consciousness, more doubts about faith will arise that may even cause them to deny what they defined as faith. And when these intensify further, they may sometimes even cause them to lose faith in the existence of correct faith. This is like a person who has been deceived numerous times by many people and may lose faith in all people and think they are all deceivers; but after time passes, people naturally return to believing, except for those who were so disappointed in faith that they decided to stubbornly deny it, even when their nature is drawn to it.

### The Crisis of Faith in Recent Generations

In recent generations, through the development of natural sciences, human and social sciences, human consciousness has developed and expanded greatly. Many areas that were mysteriously unexplained, became understood and explicable. The expansion of science improved human living conditions beyond recognition, cures were found for diseases that were previously incurable, and life expectancy increased significantly. Through technological development, the production of food, furniture, clothing, and housing improved beyond recognition, and today, an average person can live in conditions that in the past only the greatest kings could afford. Through social sciences, more efficient methods for organizing society and economy were developed, and additional methods were developed for treating mental illnesses.

In this context, some of the explanations about faith that were accepted in the past are no longer sufficient today. For example, some explanations relied on diminishing human capability, based on the fact that humans cannot understand their world, and only God can save them through miracles. Therefore, when science continues to develop and succeeds in finding solutions to many hardships, these explanations appear refuted. Thus, beliefs that were previously universal became undermined, and became objects of criticism and mockery.

## The Revival of Faith

As faith becomes freed from the limited explanations that sufficed for previous generations, faith will return to pulse in people's consciousness, and correct explanations will be found that will illuminate the path of humanity toward a meaningful, good life.

Moreover, as Jewish faith becomes more clearly explained, it will increasingly illuminate the world with a great vision, and drive Israel to call in God's name, and work toward Tikkun Olam (world repair) through the guidance of Torah, its commandments, and values. For this purpose, one must engage in Torah study with awareness of the general vision of Tikkun Olam within the Torah, and contemplate the inner, faithful ideas in all its details. Through this, all the achievements of natural and spiritual sciences will not only not interfere with the revelation of faith, or become an obstacle to it, but will enhance and elevate the revelation of faith. Both in that humans created in God's image discovered them and understood them as divine wisdom, called 'the work of creation,' and in that faith gives them ethical, moral, and divine meaning.

## Rational 'Proofs'

There were great Jewish scholars in the Gaonic and Rishonim periods, from about thirteen hundred years ago until about five hundred years ago, who strengthened faith through rational proofs. Their arguments can be divided into three main points. We'll mention them briefly:

**Causality, the Cosmological Argument:** If we accept the principle of creation, regardless of which theory, including the 'Big Bang' theory and evolution, we must assume there is a reason why the creation process began, and a reason for that reason, until we must reach the conclusion that there is an *ain-sofit* (infinite) first cause. Even if we accept the view that the world is eternal and was not created, there must be a reason for its existence, since it cannot rely on itself, as it is itself limited, and therefore, we must conclude that it relies on an *ain-sofit* cause, which is God.

**The Principle of Purpose, the Teleological Argument:** Since we see such a complex and ordered world, we must assume there is someone who arranged it for a certain purpose. That is, the previous argument referred to existence itself needing a cause, while this argument refers to the nature of existence being ordered with wisdom for some purpose.

**Human Consciousness, the Ontological Argument:** This argument proves God's existence from the fact that God is present in human consciousness, for no person can think about something that does not exist and cannot exist, but only about something that exists in reality. And if the concept of God exists in human consciousness, then God exists in reality.

## The Emergence of Philosophical Proofs

Until the Gaonic period, Jewish scholars did not engage in philosophical proofs for faith (except for Philo). Even during the Gaonic and Rishonim periods, most Jewish scholars did not engage in philosophical proofs for faith, and it is worth understanding why, at the end of the Gaonic period and during the Rishonim period, many Jewish scholars such as Saadia Gaon, Rabbeinu Bachya, and Maimonides engaged in philosophical proofs for faith.

It seems there were two reasons for this: First, the engagement with philosophical proofs appeared following the rise of philosophical discussion among scholars of other nations, and since faith needs to appear in all forms of consciousness, there arose a need to express it in philosophical tools as well.

Second, following the low state of Jews in exile, doubts arose about Jewish faith, which seemed to have failed. In this context, severe attacks against it arose from people of different religions, and there was a need to defend it with philosophical tools as well.

However, it must be noted that according to many of our Sages, despite the great value of philosophy in clarifying concepts, philosophical proofs

about faith are not binding. This is because faith precedes intellect, just as life precedes intellect. Therefore, intellect can explain the appearance of life and the appearance of faith, but cannot prove, or negate it.

## Summary of the Relationship to Rational Proofs

Ultimately, it is appropriate for every Torah student to briefly know these proofs as well, but most Jewish scholars did not rely in their faith on philosophical proofs, but rather used rational discussion to cleanse faith from any trace of physicalization. However, their faith itself relied on the trait of faith that exists in humans, that just as they know they are alive, so they believe. And the content of faith itself relies on the precise and faithful tradition from generation to generation, whose foundation is in the divine revelation where God was revealed to the patriarchs, to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, to Moshe Rabbeinu, and to all the prophets after him.

## The Trait of Humility and Jewish Faith

The trait of *anava* (humility) is essential for absorbing faith, because we cannot think or speak about God's essence, as God is beyond all comprehension. In contrast, we can think and speak about what is revealed to us. This principle is hinted at in the Torah, which does not begin with the letter *alef*, (ed., the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet), meaning, it does not begin with a description of the Creator Himself, but begins with the letter *bet* (the second letter), in other words, with creation, as it is said: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1).

Among all faiths and religions, only Israel refrains from speaking about God's essence, and this does not weaken their faith, but rather, strengthens Jewish faith. Like a person who tries to look at the sun, who will end up damaging their vision and will not be able to see anything properly, so too, one who errs and tries to think and speak about God's essence will not only fail to understand God, but will also fail to understand the purpose and goal of creation. But if one focuses on what is revealed to us, one can cleave to God with all their heart, soul and might.

## Jewish Faith Manifests in All Areas of Life

Precisely because Jewish faith bounds itself with humility, and does not try to define the Creator Himself, it deals with the full divine revelation in the world and in humans, and thus, encompasses all of human life. This is its main uniqueness, because from the perspective of strong feelings of faith, members of different nations can also reach heights as high as Jews. Similarly, in philosophical clarification ability, which deals with the divine source and strives to cleanse it from all physicalization, scholars of other nations can reach achievements as high as Jews. However, only in Judaism does faith manifest in all areas of life, in the 613 commandments as guided by the Torah, and from here, comes its strength and blessing, which extends to the whole world (Rabbi Kook in the article "Da'at Elokim" pp. 135-136).

## In Consciousness, Emotion, and All of Life

Since Jewish faith manifests in all areas of life, it is a commandment to establish it in three circles that encompass human life: in consciousness, in emotion, and in life as a whole.

In *to'da'ah* (consciousness), meaning in the study of *emunah* (faith) and its meaning, as written: "Know this day and take unto your heart that the Lord is God in heaven above and upon the earth below; there is none else" (Deuteronomy 4:39); and "I am the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:2). Also: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One" (Deuteronomy 6:4); and "Know the God of your father and serve Him with a whole heart and with a willing soul..." (Chronicles I 28:9). As mentioned, in Judaism, the study of faith is the study of divine revelation in the world, and not an attempt to understand His essence, which is beyond our comprehension. The study of divine revelation is the study of the words of Torah and prophets who explain God's guidance in the world, as well as contemplation of creation, which is also divine revelation.

In regesh (emotion), through the commandments of loving and fearing God, as written: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5), and also: “The Lord your God shall you fear, and Him shall you serve, and by His name shall you swear” (Deuteronomy 10:20).

In all of life, through studying Torah and fulfilling all its commandments, as written: “In all your ways know Him” (Proverbs 3:6). Our Sages said: “This is a small passage, on which all the fundamentals of Torah depend” (Berachot 63a), because it includes the fundamental position of Jewish faith – that faith needs to be expressed in all areas of life. And the more commandments a person fulfills, thereby revealing faith in more areas, the stronger they become in faith and it empowers them, for one commandment leads to another.

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

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**Parshat Lech Lecha: Abraham – Path Breaker or Path Follower**  
**Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone**

“Now the Lord said unto Abram, get out of your country, and from your kindred place, and from your fathers house, unto the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing.” (Genesis 12:1–2)

In these words we have the first of Abraham’s ten tests – the difficult divine demand that the first Jew leave hearth and home and follow God into a strange and unknown land. In return, there is the divine promise of ultimate national greatness and international leadership. But why does God single out Abraham?

At this fateful moment, the Torah seemingly takes Abraham’s faith and religious quest for granted without providing a clue as to how, where and why this particular nomad is worthy of divine trust and blessing. In the closing verses of Noach, we read about his genealogy, the names of his father, brother, nephew and spouse. We are provided with dry facts, travelogue locations on a map, ages at time of death. But there is nothing substantive telling us how the initiator and prophet of ethical monotheism arrived at the point where he even had a relationship with God. Is this the first time God speaks to him? And if it is, what makes the Divine believe that Abraham would heed His call?

What seems to be absent from the text is made up for in a charming and famous midrash which identifies Abraham’s father, Terah, not only as an idolator, but also as a wealthy businessman who actually trafficked in idols. His son Abram discovered the God of the universe by his own faculties of reason at a very young age.[1] When Terah had to go on a business trip, he left his young son Abram in charge of the idols store. The proprietor returned to find all of his idols but one smashed to smithereens. Abram explained that a woman had brought food for her favorite idol, whereupon all of the other idols fought over the sumptuous dish. The strongest one was the victor, having vanquished all the others. When Terah expressed skepticism, Abram mocked his father’s belief by proving to him that even he was aware of the limitations of the works of his hands.

Terah’s shop was not some fly-by-night affair rented in temporary quarters near the busiest section in town to get the crowd before the holidays. It was rather a thriving center for the idol arts – more like the luminescent chambers in any large museum with spotlights and acres of space to dramatize the repose of the idols and to explain the philosophy of idolatry. Abraham’s action was not a mere childish prank. It was a revolutionary stroke which changed the way humanity perceived its own reality and the reality of the universe for all subsequent generations. In this midrash, Terah is seen as a primitive representative of an outmoded

religion, whose iconoclast, revolutionary son broke with his father to create a new faith commitment which would ultimately redeem the world. ‘Get out of your father’s house,’ says God to the ‘born again’ Abraham.

But what if there is another way of looking at Terah more in accord with the biblical text itself? What if Terah had discovered God first – and so Abram was not so much a path breaker as he was a path follower? Perhaps Abraham was not so much a rebellious son as he was a respectful son, who continued and built upon the road laid out for him by his father?

After all, there is every reason to believe that when God tells Abraham to go forth from his country, his birthplace, to a land that God will reveal, God is communicating to a man who was already in an advanced state of God consciousness, a mind-set that was most probably based on a religious awareness first glimpsed at home. Terah himself may at one time have been a believer in idol power but may slowly have turned to the One God while Abraham was yet a very young lad, or even before Abraham was born. I suspect that a subtle clue testifying to the correctness of this position is to be found in an otherwise completely superfluous verse, especially when we remember that the Torah is not in the practice of providing insignificant travelogues.

“Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah came to 205 years; and Terah died in Haran.” (Genesis 14:18–20)

Why is it that Terah sets out for Canaan, the very place where Abraham himself ends up at the relatively advanced age of seventy-five at the behest of a call from God? Could Abraham have been completing the journey his father had begun decades earlier? And what was special about Canaan? Why would Terah have wished to journey there and why does the Torah believe the journey significant enough to be recorded even though Terah never made it to Canaan?

Further on in this parasha, Abram wages a successful war against four despotic kings in order to save his nephew Lot, who had been taken captive by them. The text then cites three enigmatic verses, which record that Malkizedek, the King of Shalem, a priest of God on High, greets Abram with bread and wine, and blesses him: “Blessed be Abram to God on High, possessor of heaven and earth, and blessed be God on High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.” (Genesis 14:19–20)

Abram then gives Malkizedek a tribute of one tenth of his spoils. Now the city of Shalem, JeruSalem, was the capital city of Canaan – and this is the first time it is mentioned in the Bible. Malkizedek literally means the King of Righteousness, and Jerusalem is biblically known as the City of Righteousness [Isaiah 1:26]. From whence did this Malkizedek, apparently older than Abram, hear of God on High (El Elyon)? Nahmanides maintains that from the very beginning of the world, the monotheistic traditions of Adam and Noah were preserved in one place in the world – Jeru-Salem, Canaan. Indeed, the flood never damaged Canaan. Their king, Shem son of Noah, also known as Malkizedek, was a priest to God-on-High, teaches Nahmanides. If this is the case, it seems logical to suggest that Terah was someone who had come to believe in this One God even in the spiritual wilds of Ur of the Chaldeans – and therefore set out for Canaan, the land of monotheism, where he wished to raise his family. He may even have had personal contact with Malkizedek, who greets the son of his friend with religious words of encouragement to the victor of a religious battle in which right triumphed over might, a victory of the God of ethical monotheism. Like so many contemporary Jews who set out for Israel, Terah had to stop half way and didn’t quite make it. But all along God was waiting for Terah’s son to embrace the opportunity to continue where his father had left off.

The common view of Terah has Abraham defy his father's way of life as he creates his own way, becoming in effect a model for many modern day penitents who radically break away from non-believing parents, rejecting everything from their past. In the alternate view that I propose, Abraham follows in his father's footsteps, builds on his father's foundation, redefines his father's way of life and for the first time in history paves the way for himself as well as others to move up the spiritual ladder by not only continuing but also advancing. Abraham is the model for those spiritual idealists who – upon embarking on a journey of religious hope – look at their pasts with an eye for reinvesting what is salvageable, attempting to improve rather than reject. Whose path survives, thrives and becomes a link to the next generation? The revolutionaries, the evolutionaries, or a combination of both? It depends probably on who and what your parents happened to have been.

[1] See Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry, 1, 1

Shabbat Shalom

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### **The Hero for the Simple People Thank Goodness, Noah Was No Saint Rabbi YY Jacobson**

Henry Kissinger's Suit

There is an old Jewish anecdote about the late former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (who died in Nov. 2023, aged 100), who decides to make for himself a custom-made beautiful three-piece suit of the finest material. During his next trip to Italy, he has himself measured by a world-renown designer, who subsequently gives him the material for his suit.

When he arrives in Paris and presents the material to the skilled tailor, the man measures his body and says: "Sorry, Mr. Kissinger, but a man your size needs at least another two inches of material."

Surprised, Dr. Kissinger continues his journey to London. There, the tailor says, "I am sorry, Mr. Secretary of State, but to turn this into a suit for your physique, I need another three inches of the material."

Disappointed, he arrives in Beijing. There the widely acclaimed Chinese tailor remarks, "I really don't understand what you were thinking, Mr. Kissinger. Your body is far larger than this material. We need another five inches."

An upset Dr. Kissinger arrives in Tel Aviv. He presents the material to a local Jewish tailor. The tailor measures him and says: "You actually don't need so much material, but I will cut off some of it and will turn the remainder of it into a stunning suit."

Kissinger is astonished. "Can you explain this to me," he asks the tailor. "I have traveled the world, and everybody claims that I need much more material. What is going on here?"

"Oh, it's quite simple," the Israeli tailor responds. "In Italy, you are a big man; in Paris, you are even a bigger man; in London, you are a great man, and in Beijing, you are a giant.

"But here in Israel, you are a small man."

The Debate on Noah's Persona

What is nothing but a Jewish joke becomes reality when it comes to one of the most important figures in the Torah—the man who single-handedly saved civilization: Noah. What the tailor told Kissinger is what we actually did to poor Noah. We cut him down half-his-size, which is both astounding and problematic.

The Torah states in the opening of this week's portion:

This is the history of Noah. Noah was a righteous man; he was wholesome in his generation; Noah walked with G-d.

The Talmud,[1] and Rashi, ever sensitive to nuance, take note of the fact that the words, "in his generation" are superfluous. Obviously, Noah lived and functioned in his generation. Why could the Torah not say simply "Noah was a righteous man, wholesome he was; Noah walked with G-d?"

The Talmud offers two opposing explanations. In the words of Rashi:

Among the sages, there are those who interpret this as praise of Noah: If he was righteous in his [corrupt] generation, certainly he would have been even more righteous had he lived in a generation of righteous people. Others interpret it negatively: In relation to his wicked generation he was righteous; had he been in Abraham's generation he would not have amounted to anything.[2]

Who was Noah? is the question. Was he really a man of extraordinary stature or just a cut above the rest? Did G-d save him because he was a "perfect tzaddik," or there was nobody better?

Why Denigrate a Hero?

Yet there is something disturbing about this discussion. The Torah is clearly trying to highlight Noah's virtue. "But Noah found favor in the eyes of G-d," is how the previous portion concludes.[3] Then, we have the above verse: "This is the history of Noah. Noah was a righteous man; he was wholesome in his generation; Noah walked with G-d." Later in the portion G-d says to Noah: "I have found you righteous before Me in this generation." G-d, clearly, is trying to extoll Noah. What drove some Rabbis to denigrate him and say that relative to other generations he would amount to nothing special?

Besides, when you can choose a complimentary interpretation and perspective, what drives some to choose a negative and condescending interpretation?[4] It runs against the instructions of the Torah to give people the benefit of the doubt.

What is more, Noah is the only person in the entire Tanach who is called a Tzaddik, a perfectly righteous individual. G-d tells Noah: "I have found you to be a tzaddik before me in this generation." [5] And we, the Jews, say: Yes, but not really...

There are various interpretations. One of my favorite ones was presented by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, in 1964.[6] Not only were the Rabbis not trying to minimize Noah's virtues; they actually wanted to highlight his praises even more. Equally important, they were trying to teach us all a transformative lesson.

Who Can Change the World?

What did Noah accomplish? He saved all mankind. In the absence of Noah, humanity would have become extinct soon after it has begun. Single-handedly he ensured the continuity of life on earth. He is the man who builds an ark, rescues all living organisms, and ensures our world would survive.

An achievement indeed, if there was ever one.

And who is the individual who achieves this feat? A person called by the Torah "a man of the earth." [7] The only story the Torah tells us about Noah, outside of constructing the Ark and spending a year in it during

the Great Flood, is that he was a farmer; he planted a vineyard, became intoxicated, and exposed himself. That's all. The last thing we hear about him is that he lay there in his tent, drunk and bare.

The Rabbis deduce from the text that "Noach, also, was of those people who were wanting in faith: he believed and he did not believe that the Flood would come, and he would not enter the Ark until the waters forced him to do so." [8]

Noach was a fine man, who lived a decent, moral life, and tried to do what G-d wanted, but was not without his flaws, doubts, and struggles. Compared to Abraham he would not amount to much.

But look what this simple fellow achieved! In a society dripping with greed and temptation, Noach held to his morals, walked with G-d, and swam against the tide, saving the planet from destruction. Civilization survived not because of a towering, titanic figure; but because of a simple man who had the courage to live morally when everyone around him behaved despicably.

Remarkably, by degrading Noach and stating that in other generations Noach would be eclipsed, the Rabbis turned him into the most inspiring figure, someone who serves as a model for all of us ordinary men and women. Noach is my hero, the hero of the ordinary cut-of-the-mill individual who is no great thinker, warrior, leader, or man of transcendence. By explaining the biblical text the way they did, the Sages turned Noach into a symbol for us ordinary people, who appreciate a fine cup of wine and a little schnaps, how we can make a difference in people's lives.

The message of Noach is life-changing. You don't need to be Abraham or Moses to transform the world. Noach was just another kid on the block, but look what he did! With your own courage not to toe the line of corruption, fakeness, and falsehood, with a little gentleness, friendliness, compassion, kindness, and goodness you can save lives, ignite sparks, and create an "ark" of sanity amidst a raging flood.

Noach was not a saint? Thank goodness. I have heard enough about saints in my life; now tell me about real people, who struggle with fear, doubt, and pain. Tell me about the guy whose IQ was not 180; he was not valedictorian of his school; he did not get a full scholarship to Oxford; he was not a tycoon or bestselling author. He was not a guru or a holy man. He was not the greatest warrior, thinker, artist, or leader. He was just a guy trying to do the right thing when everyone around him descended to greed and apathy. And look what he accomplished.

In the presence of great moral giants, he might be eclipsed, the Talmud says. Standing near Abraham he would appear insignificant. And that is exactly what made him so significant! He set a standard for those of us who appear in our own eyes as insignificant.

#### Uniform Biographies

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, dean of Yeshiva Rabanu Chaim Berlin and author of Pachad Yitzchak, laments in a letter about biographies published on the lives of Jewish leaders and rabbis. They are "cookie cutter" biographies, in which every one of them was born a holy genius. At the age of six, he knew the entire Tanach by heart, and at the age of twelve he mastered the Talmud, and his mother had to force him to eat. There is almost no trace of struggle, failure, crisis, doubt, anxiety, temptation, confusion, adversity, and the winding viscidities of the path toward individual self-discovery. Besides it being a dishonest portrayal, it deprives the biographies of having educational value. How can I try to emulate a flawless and brilliant saint?

It is an educational mistake to see spiritual success in the absence of struggle and the repression of authentic emotions. Look at Noach. He was a flawed man, and he saved the world!

One day, an old man was walking along a beach that was littered with thousands of starfish that had been washed ashore by the high tide. As he walked, he came upon a young girl who was eagerly throwing the starfish back into the ocean, one by one. Puzzled, the man looked at the girl and asked what she was doing. Without looking up from his task, the girl simply replied, 'I'm saving these starfish, Sir.'

The old man chuckled aloud, 'Young woman, there are tens of thousands of starfish and only one of you. What difference can you make?'

The girl picked up a starfish, gently tossed it into the water, and turning to the man, said, "It made a difference to that one!"

So today, decide to emulate Noach: A simple man who was true to his soul and his G-d. In your own way, stand up to lies, greed, and promiscuity. Become a beacon of light, love, and hope. Construct an ark where others can find shelter from a flood of pain and insanity. Stop giving the excuse that you are just a regular guy, minding your own business. All of us can be Noach's.

"I'm only one, but I am one. I can't do everything but I can do something, and what I can do, I ought to do." [9]

[1] Sanhedrin 108a

[2] In the Talmud *ibid.* it's a debate between Rabbi Yochanan (derogatory) and Reish Lakish (complimentary). Rabbi Chanina continues to say: "Rabbi Yochanan's view may be illustrated by the parable of a jar of wine stored in a cellar filled with jars of vinegar. In such a place, the fragrance of the wine is sensed, because of the vinegar's fumes; in any other place, its fragrance might not be sensed. Rabbi Oshaiya said: Resh Lakish's view may be illustrated by a vial of fragrant oil lying amid excrement: if its fragrance is sensed even in such surroundings, how much more so amid spices!"

Perhaps we can suggest that these two sages' dispute is connected to their own life story. Rabbi Yochanan was raised in piety and holiness; Reish Lakish was a gangster and gladiator who later became one of the greatest Torah sages of his age (Talmud Bava Metizah 84b). Reish Lakish, remembering his past, and knowing the dark side of human nature and its great potency, teaches that if Noach could succeed in his corrupt generation to live morally, certainly he would have been righteous in a more spiritual generation. Reish Lakish understood the depth of the human struggle against darkness and the enormity of the challenge some people face, and he could only stand in awe of Noach's moral standing in his generation. Rabbi Yochanan, on the other hand, could not fully appreciate what Noach had to contend against. Yet the questions in this essay are still unanswered.

[3] Genesis 6:8

[4] In the Ethics of our Fathers (1:6) we are enjoined to "judge every person favorably," giving them the benefit of the doubt. It is the sages who go so far as to declare that "the Torah is loath to speak negatively even of a non-kosher animal" (Talmud Bava Basra 123a; Pesachim 3a), a lesson derived from this very portion of Noach! If the clause "in his generations" can be understood both ways, why propose a negative interpretation? In the words of the famed Polish-Italian Talmudic sage and commentator the Beer Sheva (Rabbi Yissachar Ber Eilenberg, 1550-1623):

קשה כ"א, בדורותיו נאמר לשבח או לגנאי אם הכרע לו שאין מאחר קוהה הייתי ימי כל (א, קה דף סנהדרין שבע באר) "לגנאי לדורשו נפשו משכו למה יחנן רבי על

"All my life I was grinding (my teeth). Since the term "in his generation," can be explained positively or negatively, why did Reb Yochanan's soul compel him to explain it disgracefully?"



[5] Genesis 7:1

[6] The Rebbe shared this during a public address (“farbrengen”) on Shabbos Parshas Noach 5725, October 10, 1964. Published in Likkutei Sichos vol. 5 pp. 281-283.

On another occasion, the Rebbe shared another explanation (Likkutei Sichos vol. 25 Parshas Noach). Briefly: The sages had some independent criticism of Noach for not trying to save his generation (see Zohar Bereishis 66; 107). When they observed the term “in his generation,” they understood that this was written to underscore the flaw of Noach. They felt it was important to bring out this flaw not in order to denigrate Noach (especially since in his position he may have done the best he could) but to caution others not to follow in the same direction. What is more, Noach himself would appreciate this interpretation so that his behavior (which may have been right during his time, under those unique circumstances) should not serve as a paradigm for others at other times.

[7] Genesis 9:20

[8] Rashi to Genesis 7:7, quoting Midrash Rabah Bereishis 32:6

[9] My thanks to Rabbi Moshe Kahn (Melbourne) for his assistance in developing this insight.

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## The First Jewish War

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

The first Jewish war, if we want to call it that, shows up in Parshas Lech Lecha. We will begin our study from the beginning of Chapter 14, but first we need a little background to understand the storyline.

Avraham has done a lot of traveling, starting in Haran and ending up Eretz Yisrael. If you look at a map of the Middle East, Avraham started his life journeys from an area near the delta where the Euphrates River joins the Tigris and they collectively empty into the Persian Gulf. He then traveled northwestward into Aram Naharayim; the term “Mesopotamia” is the same as Naharayim, both meaning “between the rivers.” All of these areas are in today’s Iraq, but they are quite a distance from each other. Avraham started near the Persian Gulf, traveled northwestward along the Euphrates River until he arrived somewhere near the point where contemporary Iraq, Syria, and Turkey border. Although Iraq is almost due east of Eretz Yisrael, one never went from Israel due east to Iraq or due west the other way, because that route crosses a large desert. People from Bavel (Babylonia, which is in contemporary Iraq) traveled up the Euphrates River, which actually starts with the snowmelt of the mountains of eastern Turkey.

One would walk up the banks of the Euphrates; then, one would travel roughly westward through what is called today Syria, and then go either down the Mediterranean coast or through the Lebanese mountains and forests. Since you can’t have a forest without sufficient rainfall, there would be consistent water and food in that area. You would come southward through Lebanon and enter Eretz Yisrael from the north. So, even though one would be coming from Bavel which is east of Eretz Yisrael, one would arrive from the north.

Avraham arrives in Eretz Yisrael and there is a famine. The closest place to go for food is Egypt, so Avraham travels to Egypt accompanied by his nephew Lot, who had escorted him since his earliest journeys. When Avraham is chased out of Egypt, he has become a wealthy man. Lot is also wealthy, and they return to Eretz Yisrael. Both of them now have large flocks, and the shepherds of Lot quarrel with those of Avraham. Avraham suggests that they travel in opposite directions.

If Lot were concerned for his spirituality, he would tell Avraham that he, Lot, will keep his shepherds in line, and he would stay with Avraham. The shepherds are either his employees or his slaves, and he can insist that they do his bidding.

Lot does not take that approach. Instead, he relocates to Sodom, an affluent neighborhood, which allows him to advance his business prospects and also to live the easy life -- hedonism. Sodom is easy to identify today; it is where the Dead Sea is. Before the raining of sulfur

and salt that landed on Sodom and its sister cities, this was a very productive region. So Lot decides to graze his flock in this area, and Avraham sets off in the other direction.

That is the story line up until the point where we are beginning, with the start of Chapter 14:

“And it was in the days of the following kings: Amrafel, king of Shinar....” Shinar is Sumer, one of the cradles of civilization, which is located in the northern part of the Tigris River valley. Then we have Aryoch, king of Elasar. It is not exactly clear where Elasar is. In his book, *The Living Torah*, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan assumes that Elasar is Larsa, a city about 100 miles south of Babylon, in the lower Euphrates River valley. Eilam, the next kingdom mentioned, was a major power at this point, and is further to the east, in the mountainous areas of what is today western Iran. The fourth power is called Goyim, which is not the name of a place, but means that its king ruled over an area where many different nations had gathered.

Notice that these nations were very distant from one another; many hundreds of miles separated them. Also note that the order and prioritization of the four powers varies from pasuk to pasuk. In the first pasuk, the list is: Shinar, Elasar, Eilam, and Goyim. The second time they are mentioned, Eilam is alluded to first. The next time, the order is Eilam, Goyim, Shinar and Elasar. If the order is based on significance, this implies that which kingdom was most powerful changed in the course of events.

### Ancient empire building

At this point, I need to digress to explain how ancient civilizations built empires. An empire was created by first amassing a strong army. When the king or emperor wanted to acquire significant money, he would march his army to a city and demand tribute of gold, silver, precious jewels and the like, as well as people, whom they needed for their army and as slaves. The king of the city, who amassed all its power and wealth, was the state and ultimate authority, and he would negotiate with the invading army. If they reached an agreement, he would provide whatever had been agreed as tribute and his city would be free from this threat for some period of time. Then the imperial army would march on the next city-state.

If the local king refused the tribute, his city would prepare for an extensive siege. If it did not succeed in repelling the attack, the imperials would sack the city. Whoever they did not kill would be sold as slaves, and they would haul away all the wealth of the city, some for the imperial treasury and some to reward the members of the imperial army for their valiant courage. This is how empires were built.

Now, these four nations came to attack Sodom. Why four of them? This was unusual for the time. Usually, you had one strong nation going to collect tribute, or perhaps two, such as Persia and Media. Having four was extremely unusual. It seems that the four kings felt that they could develop an empire together.

They went to war against Sodom. Here’s where the interesting question is. Sodom is over a thousand miles away, and bear in mind that the airport connections were not very good in those days. There were no trains. The highways were not meant for busses or tanks. They had to march their troops all the way there — up the Euphrates, cut across Syria, and down to Sodom. Aside from the time this took, you also had to feed your troops this entire time and that required a great deal of bread. The prize must have been worth the investment!

Now, obviously the reason they came to Sodom was the same reason that motivated Lot to relocate there and also why Willie Sutton robbed banks. Because that’s where the money is!

They came to Sodom because Sodom was a wealthy city and they could get a lot of tribute from it. They passed many cities on the way, yet they appear to have ignored most of them. They came to threaten Sodom, Amora, Adma, Tzevo’im, and Tzo’ar, all of them in the same general area, Sodom and its sister cities.

Continues the pasuk: “They all gathered at the Valley of the Field.” Today, this is the Yam Hamelach, the Dead Sea. We see in parshas

Vayeira how it became the Dead Sea, but in parshas Lech Lecha it was not yet the Dead Sea.

“Twelve years they served Kedarla’omer.” What does “they served him” mean? It means that they paid him tribute. Kedarla’omer was the king of Eilam. He and his three cohorts launched an invasion of Sodom and its sister cities and demanded tribute on a regular basis. We don’t know if the tribute included manpower for their armies or slaves, but they certainly were demanding much tribute, enough that the pasuk describes it as service.

“Ushelosh esrai shana maradu.” Rashi understands this to mean that, for thirteen years, they did not pay tribute, i.e., they stopped paying tribute and managed to avoid it for thirteen complete years. This pasuk can also be read that in the thirteenth year they stopped paying tribute, meaning that they paid tribute for twelve consecutive years and then stopped in the thirteenth year. This was considered an act of rebellion.

Now, if Sodom was in such an economic downturn because of the tribute, Lot should have left. If he was afraid that Kedorla’omer would attack, he should have left. He should have read the handwriting on the wall and seen that all of the options, paying the tribute and being poorer, or fighting a war against Kedorla’omer, were all bad options and he should have moved onward to greener pastures.

“In the fourteenth year...” According to Rashi, this is the fourteenth year of them not having paid tribute. According to the other approach, this is year fourteen since the entire saga began. Now, what does Lot do while all this is brewing? He stays in Sodom! This is idiotic! Why not get out while the going is good?

But, of course, Lot has been moving up the totem pole in prominence in Sodom, so this may have blinded him to the seemingly obvious option. He identified as a Sodomite.

“In the fourteenth year, comes Kedorla’omer, the king of Eilam, Vehamelachim asher ito.” Note that the other three kings have now been reduced to being his cohorts. Vayaku es Refa’im be’Ashteros Karnayim - on their way, the four empires wipe out six other towns (see below). Presumably they asked for tribute and were denied, and simply erased these cities from the map: this gives a demonstration of the power of these kings.

“They smote the Refa’im in Ashteros Karnayim, the Zuzim in Hom, the Eimim in Shavei Kiryasayim, and the Chori in the mountains of Sei’ir.” After wiping out these four cities, instead of going straight to Sodom, they attacked the fields of Amalek. Now, Amalek was in the south, in what is today considered the Negev. If you look at the map, you will see that they traveled past Sodom on the way.

Who else did they attack? Amori, which was a strong power.

Having done all this, what would you imagine the kings of Sodom and its neighboring cities would do?

Either they would pay tribute or, alternatively, they could stock up for a long siege within their towns and strengthen their fortifications enough to protect their towns and withstand a siege.

Remember, warfare in those times was very barbaric. If the attackers had no means with which to destroy the walls, they would place ladders against the walls, while the people within the city would pour boiling oil down on the attackers, all while arrows and other projectiles were flying from both sides. Civilians? Collective punishment? These were never concerns.

From the inside, however, if the walls and defenses had been strengthened enough, you could even defeat Napoleon. Napoleon lost the battle of Akko because the fortress built two sets of walls. When Napoleon finally succeeded to breach the first set of walls, he discovered the inner wall. By then, he had lost so many soldiers that he simply turned around and left. This is how Akko was saved in Napoleon’s Ottoman campaign.

What did the kings of Sodom do instead? The five kings decided to fight an open battle against Kedorla’omer in the Valley of the Fields.

Open warfare in the fields. They are going up against very successful, experienced soldiers who had just won at least six military campaigns to the north and south of them -- and they chose to fight in the open fields? That is suicidal. It is completely asinine and stupid.

If Lot didn’t have a good enough reason to leave Sodom before then, he should have left at this point.

The five kings go and wage war against the four kings, and we know what happens.

The pasuk tells us that the kings of Sodom and Amora were the first to flee, and they fell there. Presumably, they fell in battle, as we use the term today -- and the “king of Sodom,” to whom we will soon be introduced, is a successor. (You could also understand it that the kings of Sodom and Amora were captured and did not die in battle.)

The survivors flee and hide in the mountains. The mountains are full of hiding places, particularly if the enemy isn’t interested in pursuing, which they aren’t. All the imperial armies want is to loot the city, take all the valuables, and seize whoever is there, either as their own slaves or to sell as slaves.

They seize all the valuables of Sodom and Amora, all the food that had been stored to survive an extensive siege and -- who else -- Lot, Avraham’s nephew, and all his flock. The pasuk emphasizes that “Vehu yosheiv biSedom, and he was living in Sodom.” We know Lot was in Sodom, so why is there a need to emphasize this? To tell us that he had so many chances to leave, but he did not.

Vayavo hapalit, “and the survivor came” -- someone who survived and escaped the battle came to Avraham Avinu, who was living in the valley of Mamrei.

Vayishma Avraham ki nishba achiv. “And Avraham heard that his brother was captured.” Lot was not his brother, he was his nephew. Why does the Torah call Lot “his brother?” Because that’s how Avraham looked at it. “Mishpacha zeinen mishpacha.” Family is family.

Even though Lot had literally turned away from Avraham and had made errors in many areas -- spiritually, financially, and politically -- he did not leave Sodom when he could have and should have. Nevertheless, Avraham still said: “he’s my brother.” There was no requirement for Avraham to do anything here, halachically. Hashem doesn’t tell him to do anything. He doesn’t ask anyone. There is no question for him, no issue. Family is family.

The first thing Avraham does is: Vayarek es chanichav, yelidei baiso, shemonei esrei ushelosh mei’os, “He militarizes those whom he has educated, those who were raised in his house, three hundred and eighteen.” Now, none of these people have any experience in warfare, whatsoever. He is taking roughly three hundred people, inexperienced individuals, straight out of yeshiva to wage war against a seasoned army of tens of thousands of hardened veterans who have wiped out eight civilizations in the last few weeks.

We have a word for that: suicide.

We know the famous Medrash Chazal, quoted by Rashi, that three hundred and eighteen is the gematria of Eliezer.

There are two reasons Chazal say this -- one implied by the pasuk and one conceptual.

The one implied by the pasuk is a missing word. It says “he gathered and armed the members of his household, three hundred and eighteen.” Three hundred and eighteen what? The Torah does not give us a number without saying what the number is made up of. It doesn’t say who these three hundred and eighteen were? Students? Soldiers? Light cavalry? Heavy artillery? It doesn’t say!

So what is three hundred and eighteen to Chazal? It is Eliezer.

But let us realize: Who waged war, Avraham’s contingency and the huge armies against him? Avraham and Eliezer against tens of thousands of trained combatants?

None of the above. If this was a conventional war, Avraham and his followers -- whether it was just Eliezer or three hundred and eighteen -- would be toast. It is beyond impossible odds. So Chazal are noting: It doesn’t matter whether it was three hundred and eighteen soldiers or just Eliezer accompanying Avraham. It didn’t matter, because it was not a conventional war. It was the ish milchamah, the “Man of war” waging war.

I’m not going to go through the rest of the pesukim, but if you look at Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan’s chumash, he has an intricate map of the battle, and

you can see that it was not a simple overnight mission. Avraham chased the tens of thousands of soldiers of the four armies up and down Eretz Yisrael until he could get back what he wanted. i.e., Lot and his property, which Avraham eventually succeeded in reclaiming. In other words, Lot was a captive, and Avraham did not know where he was. Does this sound familiar?

Avraham was pursuing his enemy, tens of thousands of them, with his three hundred or so soldiers, until he could locate his captive nephew and rescue him.

Eventually, he finds Lot and frees him. To accomplish this, he ended up releasing the entire city of Sodom.

#### King of Sodom II

At the beginning of the story, the king of Sodom had been the crown prince who succeeded when his father was killed in the original battle with Kedorla'omer. He comes to Avraham and does not express his gratitude in any way. What does he say? "Give me the people, and you can take the booty." He assumes that Avraham would sell all the Sodomites into slavery and he demands them for himself. Chutzpah +.

Avraham turns to him and says, "Listen, I don't want you telling anyone that Avraham got wealthy because of you. I'm not going to take a thread or shoelace from you. I will take my expenses, the reimbursement of business expenses. And I can't speak for Aneir, Eshkol, and Mamrei, who, even though they did not join the battles, they protected my camp for me." So, let Aneir, Eshkol, and Mamrei take their share, and I will take my reimbursements, and you keep the rest -- is what Avraham says to the king of Sodom.

And after all this, where does Lot go? He goes back to Sodom. Oh, how hard it is to teach a fool!

#### Conclusion

This is the first Jewish war, and it should serve as a model lesson for every Jewish interaction.

Whether you have an army with tens of thousands of hardened veterans with the most modern armaments, you have an army of three hundred and eighteen, or all you have is two old men. If G-d is fighting for you, it doesn't matter.

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## MOTHER OF ALL YESHIVOS: UNCOVERING THE FORGOTTEN LEGACY OF MRS. JENNIE MILLER FAGGEN

By Dovi Safier

Uncovering the forgotten legacy of Mrs. Jennie Miller Faggen, the most prolific Torah philanthropist of the interwar era

With additional Research by Gavriel Schuster and Chaya Sarah Herman  
Special thanks to Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky and family for their guidance, assistance, and encouragement

This article has been excerpted from Dovi Safier's upcoming book on Jennie Miller Faggen (2024)

One serene summer morning, a stranger entered the prestigious Ponevezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak. He walked through the building determinedly until he found a wall of dedication plaques. Then he stopped, and began to scrutinize each one. The students looked at him curiously before returning to their learning.

Finally the man turned around. "Where can I find Rabbi Kahaneman?" he asked in an American-accented Hebrew.

A nearby student, sensing the urgency in the stranger's voice, escorted him to the office of Rav Avraham Kahaneman. As his son, Rav Eliezer Kahaneman, would later recount, this was no ordinary encounter. The man had come from Philadelphia with a question that would lead them both on a remarkable journey through time.

"Where is the plaque commemorating Jennie Miller's 1929 dedication?" he asked. Rav Avraham, puzzled, pressed the stranger for details. With a trembling hand, the man removed a frayed, yellowed contract from a worn manila envelope. The document bore the signatures of Pasha bas Reb

Yisroel Miller (Jennie Miller), the Ponevezher Rav — Rav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, and Rav Ephraim Eliezer HaKohein Yolles — the Philadelphia rabbi who helped draft the contract.

The truth dawned on Rav Avraham. Decades prior, before the horrors of World War II, Rav Avraham's father, the Ponevezher Rav, had traveled from Lithuania to fundraise in America. There he met Jennie Miller Faggen, a Philadelphia woman of uncommon means and generosity. Profoundly moved by his impassioned speech at a local synagogue, Jennie had pledged \$8,000 (which is approximately equivalent to \$700,000 in 2023 when measured using gold as an inflationary measure.) to construct a new building for the Ponevezh Yeshiva, to be named "The Jennie Miller Building" in her honor. The contract specified that Jennie would retain naming rights were the yeshiva ever to relocate to Israel.

Trapped in Mandatory Palestine as war erupted, the Ponevezher Rav never returned to Lithuania. The yeshiva was obliterated, and its students and faculty were ruthlessly exterminated by the Nazis. Undeterred, the Ponevezher Rav resolved to resurrect the yeshiva in Bnei Brak, where it would ultimately become an iconic institution, surpassing its predecessor in stature and influence.

Confronted with the stranger and the long-forgotten contract, Rav Avraham Kahaneman faced an ethical quandary. Although the contract mandated Jennie's naming rights, the yeshiva had not relocated to Israel; it had in fact been utterly destroyed and reborn under the same name elsewhere.

After much contemplation, Rav Kahaneman chose to honor the spirit of the contract and the memory of Jennie Miller Faggen. He commissioned a plaque commemorating her benevolence, acknowledging that her acts of charity deserved eternal recognition and celebration.

That plaque still hangs in Ponevezh today. It's a rare reminder of a great woman who dedicated her fortune to buttressing the yeshiva world when Torah learning was hardly valued in America. Other than that plaque, scarce public reminders exist to commemorate her extraordinary generosity. It would take months of tenacious research, serendipitous leads, and several privileged conversations with the venerated rosh yeshiva of Philadelphia to unveil the full story of Jennie Miller, a patroness of yeshivos and gedolim, who was largely forgotten to history.

## Chapter I: The Box in the Basement

IT all began with a box in my basement.

I contracted coronavirus during the dark days following Purim of 2020, when fear over the pandemic was at its peak. Under strict quarantine in the basement, I decided to peruse some boxes that had been collecting dust in storage.

While most frum collectors tend to focus on antique seforim and chassidic artifacts, I had been quietly amassing a different kind of collection, a treasure trove of documents that I had nicknamed my "Vilna Genizah." Within its dusty confines lay a range of fascinating materials, including letters, marketing materials, and fundraising ledgers from early 20th century yeshivos. Through the contents of this collection, I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of the yeshiva world during a critical time in its history.

Now, as I perused the diverse files for something of interest, a small pamphlet slipped out onto the dust-covered floor. The booklet was embossed with bold English letters proclaiming, "THE WORLD FAMOUS YESHIVA COLLEGE OF TELSHE, LITHUANIA." It was dated 1929 and seemed to have been prepared by the yeshiva in advance of a fundraising visit to the US by Rav Elya Meir Bloch, the son of the rosh yeshiva Rav Yosef Leib Bloch.

The document began by outlining the more than half-century history of the yeshiva and quickly reverted to the current financial state of the yeshiva, which like most yeshivos at the time, was rather dire:

WHILE SPIRITUALLY the Yeshiva is at its height, its financial status is in fact all too lamentable. The budget of the Yeshiva — which is only \$7,000.00 monthly — has not been met for many, many months....

American Jewry must fulfill its duty to our Torah and people and must rescue the famous Yeshiva of Telshe from closing its doors to the

hundreds of applicants who are stretching forth their hands and clamoring for admission....

...Come to the support of the great Telshe Yeshiva and receive the reward of Heaven's blessings that come to those who support the Torah.

In the year 1927, when a delegation of the Yeshiva visited America, it succeeded with the cooperation of the venerable Rabbi B. L. Levinthal, of Philadelphia, to interest the benefactress of every good cause, Mrs. Jennie Miller, of said city, in the institution, in conjunction with the Yeshiva, and Mrs. Jennie Miller, in her generosity, has undertaken to cover the greater part of the budget of the said "KOLLEL RABBIS" and because of same, the "KOLLEL" hereafter shall be known as the "JENNIE MILLER KOLLEL."

I was immediately intrigued. Could it be true that the renowned Telshe Yeshiva named its kollel after an American woman? This would seem highly improbable to anyone familiar with Lithuanian yeshivos. But here it was in black and white. I was determined to uncover the truth.

Forgotten Philanthropist

A Google search netted some positive results. YIVO's digital archive contained several letters written to Jennie Miller from various gedolim and yeshivos. There was a thank-you letter from the Chofetz Chaim in Radin, a letter of acknowledgment from Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzenski wishing Mrs. Jennie Miller success in her endeavors, and most surprisingly, a missive from the Mir Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Eliezer Yehuda Finkel, written on the stationery of a Mir Kollel titled, "The Kohlel of Ten Rabbis on the name of Mrs. Pesha Miller, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania." So there were not one, but two kollelim named for this forgotten woman. Next, I checked the comprehensive book *Ketzur Chalamish: The Golden Age of the Lithuanian Yeshivas in Eastern Europe* by the incomparable yeshiva historian Dr. Ben-Tsiyon Klibansky, where I found mention of regular donations that Jennie Miller sent to the Lomza Yeshiva under the leadership of Rabbi Yechiel Mordechai Gordon:

"In 1925, Rav Yechiel Mordechai Gordon secured a pledge from Pesha Miller for \$200 a month toward the new branch of Lomza in Petach Tikvah. This would be sufficient to support ten students."

More evidence of her generosity surfaced while I perused the online archives of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, which reported in 1930 that Rav Menachem Mendel Kasher had obtained a commitment from Jennie Miller Faggen to support a kollel of ten scholars to assist him with the research for his groundbreaking Torah Shelaimah project.

This bold initiative was an encyclopedic work that combined the parshiyos of the Torah with all the relevant passages from Chazal across Shas and all midrashim, even obscure midrashim from original manuscripts. The 38 volumes published during Rav Kasher's lifetime surely consumed the bulk of his time and likely could not have been produced without Mrs. Miller's assistance.

Slowly but steadily, I began to sense the unusual dimensions of her philanthropy. I had already studied the lives of other great Torah philanthropists of the time, dynamic figures such as Irving Bunim, Harry Fischel, Samuel Kaufman, and Mrs. Necha Golding in the US; and the legendary Russian microbiologist Dr. Waldemar Haffkine and Mrs. Flora Sassoon in Europe. While these individuals were all well-known philanthropic icons, none seemed to have reached ennie Miller's level of giving towards yeshivos. Why was so little known about her?

I continued my research, and the basic contours of the story began to take shape: Jennie Miller was a remarkable woman who was born in America and had been widowed twice. For the bulk of her life, she resided in the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood of Philadelphia, and during the golden age of European yeshivos in the interwar period, she became likely the world's most prolific supporter of Torah. For many years, dozens of yeshivos received donations from her each month, and her 18-room mansion at 1837 North 33rd Street hosted some of the greatest gedolim of the era.

These gedolim described her in glowing terms. In a 1934 letter from Kletzk, Rav Aharon Kotler referred to her as "Esteemed Mother of Torah." At the end of that same year, a letter of gratitude from Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin paid tribute to her generous support of Torah scholars:

"Chanukah greetings to you, a modern Chashmonaite, who is most zealously and wholeheartedly aiding in the preservation of Judaism in our generation!"

Why, then, was her name so unfamiliar? How had her legacy of generosity fallen so utterly into oblivion? Surely there was an annual pilgrimage to her gravesite, I reasoned. Perhaps there were plaques paying tribute to her at the Mir Yeshiva in Yerushalayim, Lomza Yeshiva in Petach Tikvah, or the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland. Why had not even one of my six Bais Yaakov-educated sisters ever performed a song or play dedicated to her? Someone must have written a book or even an extensive article about her. Perhaps it was out of print or published in a hard-to-read academic Yiddish?

To find out more about Jennie Miller — and to understand why she'd virtually disappeared from the public consciousness — I realized that I needed to find something more than a newspaper blurb or sefer dedication (of which there were many). I would need to find someone who knew Jennie Miller personally.

After discovering that she'd lived into her nineties and passed away in 1968, I began to hope that there would still be someone around who remembered the good deeds and magnanimity of the woman popularly known in Strawberry Mansion as "Aunt Jen."

The eBay Clues

I began sounding out fellow students and teachers of history. My email to noted Jewish historian Professor Shnayer Leiman was a good start. He responded:

Yedidi David,

I am, of course, familiar with the name Jennie Miller-Faggen. I have many of the envelopes she received from the various East-European institutions she supported. See attachment for a sample. But I know little about her.

He went on to suggest several others to contact for possible leads, but none had any further knowledge. I continued by trying some of my usual contacts. An email to Professor Shaul Stampfer netted me no results. The always-helpful Yeshiva University archivist Shulamith Z. Berger and her trusted teacher, Rabbi Dr. Aharon Rakeffet Rothkoff, were equally flummoxed. (Later on, Shulamith Berger was able to track down several letters in the YU Archive).

Arthur Kiron, the curator of Judaica Collections at the University of Pennsylvania, politely apologized that he could not offer any further information — but did send me several further local contacts. Then I tried Rabbi Moshe Kolodny, the long-time archivist at the America Orthodox Jewish Archives in lower Manhattan, and my close friend and colleague at Mishpacha Magazine, Yehuda Geberer.

Dr. Gil Perl, then Headmaster of Kohelet High School in Philadelphia and the author of a prolific book on the Netziv of Volozhin, couldn't help me. My dear friend Dr. Zev Eleff was surprisingly lacking information. Someone suggested that I try the noted historian Gershon Bacon, who was born and raised in the area. (I even went so far as to reach out to Professor Noam Chomsky, whose father was involved in Jewish education in Philadelphia during Jennie Miller's lifetime.) Klum. Gornisht.Nada. Nothing.

Even as these historians lacked further information, more clues began to appear in the form of primary sources. Letters and charitable receipts from venerable rabbinic figures and great yeshivos were regularly posted on the websites of various Jewish auction houses, book dealers, and even eBay.

Where were these letters coming from? There seemed to be dozens, possibly hundreds that had passed through these channels. Perhaps Jennie Miller had some descendant who was selling off the "family archive"?

I reached out to Chaya Sarah Herman, a preeminent Jewish genealogist who is a family friend and has helped me solve these sorts of mysteries in the past. I asked her to try and put together some sort of family tree. Perhaps once that was complete, a good old game of Jewish Geography would locate a relative who could fill in the elusive story.

Meanwhile, I endeavored to contact several rabbanim and rebbetzins whom I thought might know more. I emailed Rabbi Elazar Meir Teitz of Elizabeth, NJ, whose father Rabbi Pinchas Mordechai Teitz had been

active in Telshe fundraising circles during the 1930's and perhaps had visited Mrs. Miller. He apologized that he had nothing to share. I reached out to Rabbi Paysach Krohn, whose mother grew up in Philadelphia and had authored a charming memoir chronicling her childhood there. Surprisingly, he knew nothing about Jennie.

The great gaon Rav Moshe Brown of Far Rockaway, whose shul I grew up in, was one of Philadelphia's brilliant native sons. Perhaps he would have heard something from his father, Dr. Joseph Brown? Or perhaps his Rebbetzin Leah (née Weinberg), who also hailed from an influential frum family in Philadelphia, would be familiar with Jennie? Neither of them had heard her name before. I asked my dear friend Rabbi Osher Rosenbaum to check with his great-aunt Rebbetzin Shoshana Gifter (wife of the Telshe Rosh Yeshivah, Rav Mordechai Gifter) — but she was unaware of the story.

After months of inquiries and research, I still hadn't made the hoped-for progress. I had the bare outlines of a story, but not much else. I had established that a great philanthropic woman in Philadelphia donated tremendous sums of money to Torah causes in the early 20th century — but I hadn't managed to track down the motive or real story behind her largesse, or even the source of her funds.

I could have given up and relegated the Jennie Miller file back to my basement. But just then, with the help of Chaya Sarah Herman, my very curious friend Gavriel Schuster, and literally dozens of visits to libraries, archives, and private collectors from across the world, I began to make progress. Finally, I began to cobble together bits and pieces of Jennie Miller's life.

## Chapter II: Abiding Faith in the Treifene Medineh

You might say that Jennie's story dates back to the years directly leading up to the Great Immigration (1820-1880), an era of Jewish immigration to the United States from the areas in Central Europe that would later become ratified as unified Germany. A portion of those immigrants were single women of marriageable age who were sent by their parents to the New World in search of a match that would provide them with a more secure and prosperous future.

It was just shortly following the cease of the Franco-Prussian War and the proclamation of the Second German Empire by Kaiser Wilhelm I and Otto von Bismarck, that 19-year-old Hannah Cohen (then known as Hannchen Wolff) departed Hamburg, Germany, alone in steerage class on the S.S. Germania, never to return to her home in Gembitz (district of Posen). She arrived in New York City on June 28, 1871 and likely moved in with the Kutner family, who were relatives of her mother, Tzirel Wolff (née Kutner), on the Lower East Side.

Just 15 months after she arrived in America, she married 23-year-old Israel (Yisrael) Cohen, a fellow native of the Posen region hailing from the town of Wittkovo, which was just a few miles from her hometown of Gembitz. Municipal records show that the wedding was officiated by a local rabbi named Rabbi Shlomo Beiman.

If prosperity and stability were what Hannah sought in America, she was soon disappointed. Israel Cohen eked out a meager living as an expressman, tasked with the delivery and security of a variety of commodities, such as gold and currencies.

The Lower East Side of the 1870's was quite different from the Eastern-European hub that it morphed into decades later. It was then nicknamed Kleindeutschland (Little Germany), an homage to its predominantly German population. It was there that Peshah (Jennie) Cohen was born in 1874 (There is a lot of confusion over her year of birth, but both census reports and her marriage certificate indicate it was 1874), followed shortly thereafter by a brother named Shlomo Zalman (Samuel). It wasn't until 1894 that the Chofetz Chaim issued his famous plea to American Jewry in his sefer *Nidchei Yisroel* (1894) declaring, "If a 'proper person' has made the tragic mistake of emigrating America, he must return to his home where G-d will sustain him. He must not be misled by thoughts of remaining there until he becomes wealthy." Only back in Eastern Europe, he believed, could a Jew live a proper religious lifestyle and "bring up his children in Torah and piety."

According to acclaimed historian Jeffrey Gurock, one of the earliest such statements came in 1862 from no less than Rav Yosef Shaul Nathanson of Lemberg, the acclaimed author of the responsa sefer *Sho'el u-Meshiv*, who had cautioned that "dedication to the Torah is weak" in that far-off land to where so many "patently unknowledgeable people are migrating." The Cohen family belonged to the small minority that withstood that powerful tide, remaining true to their roots and maintaining an observant life. Overall, Jewish immigrants from the Posen region, which was geographically (and religiously) closer to Poland, remained more devoted to traditional life, even in the "treifeneh medineh." An anecdote from this period shared by the historian Hasia R. Diner, which occurred around that time in nearby Washington, bolsters that assertion:

To take but one example, thirty-eight members of the Washington Hebrew Congregation, many of them recent arrivals from Posen, withdrew from the city's only synagogue when it installed an organ in 1869. They objected with equal vigor to the conversion of the service to an English-only ritual and to the elimination of the kiddush, the prayer ushering in the Sabbath, on the grounds that it blessed G-d for having chosen the Jews "among all the nations." The dissenters believed that only Hebrew should be the language of worship and that texts like the kiddush could not — and should not — be altered. Those who seceded formed Adas Israel, the capital's second congregation.

### Faith Amid Misfortune

Jennie was one of those rare youngsters who held on to traditional values despite the odds. In a recently discovered interview with Jennie Miller (née Cohen) published in 1924 in the *Yiddishe Velt*, the writer gives us a rare glimpse into Jennie's upbringing:

She is herself an American by birth. She was born and bred in the city of New York. And yet, for all the diverse temptations that must have assailed her, Mrs. Miller has zealously guarded in spirit and indeed the principles of Orthodoxy which formed the foundation of her own home life. The power that sustained her in her moments of despair was a hope derived from the religious training received as a young girl and fostered throughout her life.

On February 3, 1893, tragedy struck the Cohen home when Israel Cohen suffered a heart attack and perished. After extensive searching, we discovered his grave at one of New York's oldest Jewish burial spots, in the Gniezno Landsmannschaft section of the Bayside Cemetery. He left behind a grieving widow and two orphans whose inheritance included little but their faith in the One Above. As the *Yiddishe Velt* put it:

...She (Jennie) had hope. A hope, a belief that had been instilled in her from her very childhood, that had grown with the years. An abiding faith in the ultimate good even within evil and misfortune. It was that which buoyed her up, forced her to walk erect, with head up and eyes forward, to take up the thread of life once more even though her nearest and dearest had been taken from her. And then, while everything still loomed empty before her, she conceived a splendid idea of creating happiness out of misfortune.... As she said, "I don't know what would have become of me if I had not this belief and this hope to bolster me...."

As I was soon to learn, Jennie lived a life that was marred by one tragedy after another, but buoyed by her faith and commitment, she drew a positive picture and lived with joy and optimism.

Two years later, records show that Jennie Cohen married an entrepreneurial 27-year-old immigrant from the Yanishkel region of Lithuania named Harry Miller. Much of Harry's background remains shrouded in mystery, but we do know that he was likewise orphaned at a young age. Shortly thereafter, the new couple settled in Philadelphia, which was then home to the third-largest Jewish population in America (after New York and Chicago).

Philadelphia had also recently become home to a very determined rabbinic transplant named Rabbi Dov Aryeh (Bernard) Levinthal; his arrival in 1891 is in fact viewed as a turning point in the city's Jewish history.

Born in a suburb of Kovno in 1865 and descended from 11 generations of rabbis, Rabbi Levinthal received his training and ordination from Rav

Yitzhak Elchonon Spector and Rav Shmuel Mohilever. At the age of 19, he married Mina Kleinberg.

Rabbi Levinthal's son, famed jurist and community leader Louis Levinthal, recalled that even after his father accepted the offer of a rabbinic pulpit in Philadelphia, those around him pleaded with him not to go, saying, "The land is treif, the people are treif, even the stones in America are treif!"

Their fears were not unfounded. "I found virgin territory here," reminisced Levinthal in a 1934 interview quoted in Alex Goldman's *Giants of Faith*. "Plain and simple, and undone. Even the ground, as it were, was not prepared, not ready for sowing. I had to begin from scratch. The road was strewn with mountains to hurdle. I was not to be deterred." Rabbi Levinthal's 60-year tenure at the helm of the Philadelphia rabbinate was in its infancy when the Millers moved to Philadelphia. Their first home was on North Sixth Street in the Society Hill neighborhood, which was then the hub of Jewish life for the city's Russian immigrants. The city was dotted with landsmannschaft shuls that focused on social issues rather than worship and prayer, so much so that Rabbi Levinthal once described the primary function of these shuls as a place where one went to recite the *gomel* blessing after arriving in America.

Interestingly, it was not at Ahavas Chesed Anshe Shavel, the Ponevezher Lodge, Shomrei Emuno Anshe Kelm, or Tiferes Israel Anshe Lita that the Millers chose to daven, but at one of the more prominent local congregations, a Galician congregation called Bnei Halberstam.

Back in 1884, seven immigrants from Galicia established one of the first chassidische shtetlach in America (and the first in Philadelphia), which they named Bnei Halberstam, evoking the name of Rav Chaim Halberstam, the Divrei Chaim of Sanz. Two years later they celebrated a gala *hachnassas sefer Torah* after receiving a specially ordered *sefer Torah* from a prestigious *sofer* back in Sanz, dedicating it in memory of the Divrei Chaim, who had passed away several years prior. This unique event was celebrated across the city, piquing the interest of even the most secular of Jews.

Records preserved by the Philadelphia Jewish Archives, (now housed at Temple University), along with local newspaper reports suggest that Harry likely met his future business partner, Abraham Pleet, at Bnei Halberstam.

Pleet had immigrated to America as a teenager from the Lithuanian city of Shadova. Upon his partnership with Harry Miller, who had risen from a simple peddler to proprietor of a respectable business where he bought and sold cloth materials, the firm of Miller & Pleet was established.

During the turn of the century, Philadelphia was home to a flourishing textile industry that employed over 40 percent of the city's workforce, including a significant portion of its immigrant population. Jewish immigrants skilled in tailoring and dressmaking were drawn to this city of abundant work opportunities.

Archival issues of *Textile World* magazine from the early 1900s, housed at the New York Public Library, showed that Miller & Pleet quickly expanded their business and prospered in the worsted fabrics trade (used for high-end suits and coats). This success prompted them to explore the possibility of cutting out the textile middlemen by purchasing their own mill.

In 1905, they signed a lease with the Delaware County Trust Company for a 20-acre mill property in the small town of Lenni, situated along Chester Creek, near the Delaware state line. The agreement included water rights and 25 "dwelling houses" for employee accommodation. Three years later, they opted to purchase the mill and renamed it Yorkshire Worsted Mills, which, after renovations, became one of the largest and most active in the region.

Harry also ventured into the real estate business and held significant investments in public securities and government bonds. When he and other prominent Jewish businessmen experienced discrimination at the hands of the exclusively gentile loan committees at local banks, they boldly opened their own bank, named People's Trust. By 1910, 42-year-old Harry Miller had become one of Philadelphia's wealthiest Jews. But his similarities with other affluent Jews in the city ended there.

Harry and Jennie observed with concern as their fellow Jewish Philadelphians drifted away from traditional Judaism, embracing the emerging Conservative and Reform movements instead. Feeling the need to respond, they sought to collaborate with someone who shared their convictions. Rabbi Levinthal, who had swiftly risen to prominence as one of America's foremost rabbinic figures during his first decade of service in Philadelphia, seemed the perfect ally.

At the time, cities across the country were courting Rabbi Levinthal with major offers. When Rabbi Levinthal began to seriously consider an offer to lead Chicago's Russian congregations, Harry stepped in to ensure that their beloved leader would stay put. In order to do so, he gathered a group of the city's most important leaders and began to organize a *kehillah* system, which would afford Rabbi Levinthal control over consequential and potentially contentious issues — from *kashrus* and *gittin* to a unified Talmud Torah system. After spending a few days pondering the offer, Rabbi Levinthal agreed to Harry Miller's proposal and vowed to stay in Philadelphia — where he would serve as the city's leading rabbinic figure (across all denominations) until his passing in 1952.

Memories of a White Limousine

Now that I had established the source of Jennie's wealth and the fact that her husband had served as the first president of the Philadelphia Kehillah and forged a close relationship with Rabbi Levinthal, I felt I was getting a bit closer to the source. Rabbi Levinthal, after all, was connected to leading rabbanim and *roshei yeshivah* from across the world. My next move was to place an ad in Philadelphia's *Jewish Exponent*, which after 135 years was somehow still around:

Surprisingly, the ad netted me results, only they weren't exactly the type I'd been hoping for. My phone began to ring with calls from older residents of Philadelphia (all still under strict quarantine orders) hoping I'd be interested in talking to a former resident of the city — even if he/she happened to know nothing whatsoever about the subject at hand.

Almost none of these friendly, elderly Philadelphia Jews were familiar with Jennie. Most were lonely older women who just wanted to *schmooze*. About anything. "Who is this Jennie Miller and why are you so interested in her?" they asked, in a way that only a doting Jewish grandmother could. One of my first respondents, Sylvia, was born in Philadelphia in 1927 and left as a three-year-old. Our first call got slightly awkward when the charming nonagenarian with the heaviest Philadelphia accent I'd ever heard asked if I was single — she had a local niece whom she was hoping could meet a nice Jewish man.

Then Albert K. called from a local senior home, and I had the sense I was getting closer. He had grown up in Jennie's neighborhood and vividly described playing ball on a stoop of the Lichtenstein home, next door to Jennie's mansion. He recalled her chauffeur washing the white limousine that transported Jennie and her guests around town.

Some more basic information came via other callers, but not much of substance. Perhaps the window had closed and it was just too late to find someone who could actually recall Jennie and add some substantive information to my search. But I wasn't ready to abandon it just yet.

### Chapter III: Finding Jennie

ASI was soon to discover, it wasn't just "someone" who recalled Jennie Miller; it was no less than the *zaken hador*, one of the great *gedolim* of our times. And he didn't just know of her; he and his family in fact shared a close relationship with her. But it took me some time, and more effort, to establish that link.

I reached out to Rabbi Yehuda Shemtov, whose father Rabbi Avraham Shemtov is the longtime *shaliach* of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in Philadelphia and is widely connected across the city. He recommended that I speak with long-time Philadelphia resident Dr. Joseph Mandelbaum, who serves as the president of *Chevre Bnei Moshe*, the *chevre kaddisha* of Philadelphia.

I spoke to Dr. Mandelbaum for more than an hour. He knew the story of Jennie Miller, and while was too young to have been acquainted with her personally, he filled in several important blanks. Dr. Mandelbaum told me that Harry Miller passed away after a short illness in 1923, leaving Jennie

an extraordinarily wealthy widow. During Harry's lifetime, the Millers invested incredible sums to improve the city's local Jewish educational infrastructure, including the Central Talmud Torah network of Rabbi Levinthal.

It didn't take long for me to find evidence of these activities in various newspapers of the time. In fact, there was hardly an institution in the city that did not benefit from the Millers' largesse. In 1909, they donated four and a half acres of land to build the Hebrew Sheltering Home, which cared for homeless and neglected children. Shortly thereafter they endowed the adjacent infant shelter with an accompanying daycare center. Abandoned babies were cared for in the "Harry Miller Ward," a dedication likely spurred by Harry and Jennie's mutual experience as orphaned children.

As with all of the institutions they established, the Exponent noted that they wrote up a contract with the trustees of both the orphanage and school stipulating that their kitchens remain exclusively kosher for perpetuity, a rarity at the time.

Among all the Millers' projects, though, there was one that struck me in particular.

Neither Gold nor Yiddishkeit

In 1903, the Ridbaz, Rav Yaakov Dovid Willowski, the Rav of Slutzk, was invited to Philadelphia by Rabbi Levinthal to address the second convention of the Agudath Harabonim, which Rabbi Levinthal had cofounded the previous year.

In his speech, the Ridbaz assailed American Jewry for abandoning the chinuch of their children, relying instead on a public school system where "too much time was spent in athletic sports and pastimes and useless amusements." He explained that with the establishment of Jewish schools, children could still get a proper education while spending the time they were currently wasting on extracurriculars. learning Torah.

(On his previous visit to America in 1900, the Ridbaz was heartbroken by the low religious standards he witnessed and exclaimed that, "Whoever comes to America is a poshea Yisrael, for here, Yiddishkeit and the Torah shebe'al peh are trodden underfoot.... It was not only their homes that the Jews left behind in Europe; it was their Torah, their Talmud, their yeshivos and their talmidei chachamim." He closed the speech with a knockout punch: "In Europe, they say that Yiddishkeit in America is nothing, but gold is found in the gutter. The fact is, neither gold nor Yiddishkeit is to be found here.")

In the aftermath of the 1903 convention and the Ridbaz's impassioned call for standardized Torah education, Rabbi Levinthal vowed to revamp the city's lackluster Central Talmud Torah, which he had founded together with Dr. Cyrus Adler and Judge Mayer Sulzberger soon after his arrival in the city a decade prior. With the words of the Ridbaz, who had bemoaned the fact that "there were 13- and 14-year-olds who could not read from the siddur or even repeat daily blessings" surely echoing in his mind, he made his first major move.

In September he announced the opening of an afternoon yeshivah for high school students, where Gemara would be taught by proper rebbeim (for a time he taught the highest class). At first, enrollment was weak, but the following year, more than 60 students enrolled.

The Millers became the most significant donors to this new high school, which was named Mishkan Israel, presumably in memory of Jennie's father Yisroel Cohen.

As the Millers' philanthropy brought the community a plethora of new Jewish schools as well as other modern facilities dedicated to the young, their close friends could not ignore the elephant in the room. The beloved patrons of their community, who were now married for over a decade, had not yet merited children of their own.

It was clear, however, that Jennie was a remarkable woman with a unique perspective on life. Bnai Jeshurun's Rabbi Shlomo Barzel, who lived next door to her, shared a story about Jennie's response when faced with expressions of pity over her childlessness. Instead of feeling sorry for herself, she would point out the incredible opportunity she'd been given to support Torah, and with a wink, she'd cite the Gemara (Sanhedrin 19b) that says, "Whoever teaches someone's son Torah, it is as if he sired him."

The Miller Community Center was host to thousands of Jewish schoolchildren from several Talmud Torahs and eventually Beth Jacob, which was Philadelphia's first Jewish Day School, founded by Rabbi Chaim Uri Lipschitz

MY conversation with Dr. Mandelbaum quickly morphed into a more personal one, as he told me about his own life in Philadelphia, where he was one of the first students at Beth Jacob, the first full-time Jewish day school in Philadelphia, located in the Strawberry Mansion where Harry and Jennie had moved in 1910. The school was housed in an annex of the Bnai Jeshurun Synagogue, which carried the Miller family name, having been dedicated by Jennie in memory of her husband in 1924.

That dedication was the very event for which Jennie sat down for the aforementioned interview with the Yiddishe Velt and delineated her worldview, which centered upon the importance of Jewish education.

She is an unassuming person, rather flustered by this business of being interviewed. The fuss one has made about her \$50,000 donation, by the press, quite naturally is pleasing to her, and yet very plainly she is very much surprised.

The principles she enunciates, her statement that every Jewish child must have a real Jewish education in the history of his people and the tenets of his religion, springs from a simple and sincere faith.

Religion has proved her mainstay in her darkest hour.... That which gave her strength must be nurtured in every Jewish youth.

"They call us [women] the builders of the home," she continued. "A vocation of which any woman might be proud. That which any woman could devote all her energies, all her talents, and consider it a task worthwhile. Molding human beings — could anything be more stupendous, more inspiring, more worth concentrating upon?"

"Many have tried. And how many have failed! Why has it been so difficult to see that Jewish home, without which Judaism is robbed of its flavor and its meaning? To run a Jewish home in which the Jewish children are ignorant of things Jewish is meaningless. How can one expect a young child to grow up if it has not something on which to pin its faith — something intangible and unarticulated, perhaps, and yet something that will inspire his imagination and hold his loyalty. Religion! That is what the Jewish home lacks — religion and knowledge....

... "What a joy there is in giving!" she exclaimed after a pause. "If only they [the rest of the wealthy Jews in Philadelphia] would know how happy it makes one to help others, they would give generously. What greater joy than to help a child? Think of these innocent little children. They look to us for help, to show them where to go, and what path to take. And the joy of directing them right!

"Money?" she scoffed. "What good does money do if you can't spend it for something that will give you pleasure?"

"We can't take our fortunes with us to the grave. Why should one wait until one is dead to plan good deeds? Far better to do them when one is alive and able to enjoy them. I have never been happier," she said, "than I am now, since this thought of endowing a community center came to me, since I have thrown myself into the practical work that followed."

#### Chapter IV: A Home and a Haven

ASI reached the end of my conversation with Mr. Mandelbaum, he mentioned something that would become a turning point in my exhaustive research: "Did you know that Jennie Miller was honored by the (Philadelphia) Yeshiva in 1956?"

Flabbergasted, I realized that I'd totally overlooked the Philadelphia Yeshiva angle. After I completed the call, I quickly emailed Rabbi Dovid Kamenetsky, a son of Rav Shmuel and a world-class Torah scholar, author, and researcher in his own right, asking if he had ever heard of Jennie Miller-Faggen. He immediately replied:

Indeed! She was a close friend of our family. We knew her well and when I was a kid we used to visit her in an old-age home in Atlantic City. We have many presents from her and a beautiful chair adorns my parents' home on which all the gedolim who came to the US between the wars sat

on when they visited her. She was one of a kind, a descendent of Rabbi Akiva Eiger who paid \$150,000 to a Russian brother-in-law to come to the US and perform chalitzah during the 20s.

The chair, how had I forgotten the chair! It was all becoming quite clear to me now. This was the famous chair that has adorned Rav Shmuel's living room for the past nearly 70 years. Rabbi Moshe Bamberger, Mashgiach Ruchani of Beis Medrash L'Talmud/Lander College for Men, featured it in his book, *Great Jewish Treasures* (ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications), describing Jennie Miller as follows:

Among those who visited her stately home in the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood of Philadelphia were such Torah leaders as the Lubliner Rav, Rabbi Meir Shapiro; the Kovna Rav, Rabbi Avraham Dov Ber Kahana Shapiro; the Baranovitch Rosh Yeshivah, Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman; the Kamenitz Rosh Yeshivah, Rabbi Boruch Ber Leibowitz; the Grodno Rosh Yeshivah, Rabbi Shimon Shkop; and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson.

Upon their arrival, these august guests would be ushered into the dining room. At the head of the table stood a large regal chair, upon which their hostess insisted that they sit, as it was there exclusively for them. In this way, she demonstrated her genuine kavod HaTorah — a calling to which she dedicated her life. Mrs. Miller Faggen enjoyed a very close relationship with yblch"t the Philadelphia Rosh Yeshivah, Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetsky and his family. As she aged and could no longer maintain her large home, she relocated to an apartment on the New Jersey shore. On the Purim prior to her move, she sent the Kamenetsky family — along with her shalach manos — a cherished gift, the legendary chair of the gedolim.

Two days later, I got in the car with Gavriel Schuster and drove two hours to Philadelphia to see Rav Shmuel and his rebbetzin. Along the way, we decided to make a quick stop at 1837 North 33rd Street, the Strawberry Mansion home where Jennie Miller-Faggen had resided for more than 40 years.

Despite the downward trend the neighborhood had taken, it didn't take too much imagination to see why 33rd Street was once home to Philadelphia's wealthy and powerful during the interwar period. The Miller home was located on a wide promenade, directly facing picturesque Fairmount Park. Standing four stories high, it was among the only houses on the block that remained in good condition as the area had fallen into disrepair.

As luck had it, the current owners were standing outside, tending to their garden. I introduced myself and awkwardly attempted to explain the significance of the home that they resided in. Surprised but gracious, they invited us to come inside and tour their immaculately restored mansion. I'm not usually one for adventure, but this seemed like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Upon entering the home, it struck me that this was no simple abode. I began to tally a list of the rabbinic greats who had been inside this home nearly 100 years earlier. It was clear that I was standing on hallowed ground. I bounced up and down the steps in a trance, hardly listening to my host's words as I transported myself back to another era and recalled just one of the historic events that had occurred there.

"Upon entering the home (of Jennie Miller), it struck me that this was no simple abode"

#### A Dear Lady with a Jewish Heart

In August of 1926, Rav Meir Shapiro traveled to America, for what was to have been a three-month fundraising trip on behalf of his monumental undertaking to build Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin. After a large welcome ceremony from leading members of the Agudath Harabonim in New York, the excitement over his visit died down and the great Rav Meir Shapiro was faced with the stark realization that raising the necessary funds to complete the yeshivah was not going to be an easy task.

The following month, the great Torah leader hired himself out to a Brooklyn congregation as a chazzan for the Yamim Noraim, hoping to earn a few dollars and spare himself the embarrassment of having to borrow money for an eventual return trip to Europe.

But in December, help arrived in the form of an old acquaintance from Europe, Rav Ephraim Eliezer Yolles, the rav of Congregation Kerem Israel in Philadelphia, who resided just a few blocks away from Jennie Miller in Strawberry Mansion.

Rabbi Yolles invited Rav Meir to spend some time at his home in Philadelphia, where he promised to help him raise funds. That home, known fondly as the "Beis HaRav," had a vast Torah library, where the Pietrikower Rav (as Rav Meir Shapiro was then known) felt extremely comfortable.

Rabbi Yolles set out to ensure that Rav Meir would receive maximum exposure and arranged for him to deliver a shiur in Mishkan Israel, the local Talmud Torah for high school age boys, which had been founded by Rabbi Levinthal with the financial support of the Millers.

A few days after that historic shiur, Rav Meir saw his lot change, when Rabbi Yolles accompanied him on a visit to Jennie Miller. The story of this monumental meeting was shared by Rav Meir's close student and first biographer, Rabbi Yehoshua Baumol, in "A Blaze in the Darkening Gloom" (Feldheim Publications):

Having been advised that the woman (Jennie Miller) was able and willing to help generously, Rav Meir went to visit her; and no sooner was he there, seated in the parlor, than she offered to make a major dedication worth \$2,500 for the new building. The Rav, however, gave a slight frown. Sensing a certain displeasure in him, she asked for the reason. Was the amount not enough, perhaps?

In reply, Rav Meir told her of a small incident that happened with him back home, in Piotrków: A certain beggar made his rounds in the city every week, to gather the money he needed to sustain him. Once he knocked on Rav Meir's door, too, and he walked in to hold out his hand. Without much thought the Rav took out a coin of 50 kopecks and gave it to him — an amount that the beggar could collect ordinarily from perhaps 20 other people.

Well, said Rav Meir to the woman, that indigent beggar didn't take it, but began to argue and bargain instead. He insisted that 50 kopecks was too little.

Continued Rav Meir: "So I asked him: 'In the city, you get from one person a twentieth of what I'm giving you, and you take it well enough; you're satisfied. And here you go and tell me that this is too little?' He upped and answered me: 'Honored Rabbi, when I bargain and argue with you, it's worth my while: because I may get another fine, large coin like this. In town, if I go and argue for more, what will I get? Another kopeck or two? I save my breath and stroll on to the next person. I might as well get my next kopeck from him. It's easier and quicker than trying to extract it from the first man.'

"You see, then," Rav Meir explained, "I learned the lesson from that shrewd old beggar: Where I get a small, modest donation, I take it and make no effort to bargain for more. Here, however, I find a dear lady with a Jewish heart that understood my project well enough to give such a large sum directly, as soon as I came in. So it pays for me to try to argue and bargain for more."

Her response was to pledge yet another \$2,500.

Rabbi Yolles then drew up a contract between the two parties and had it countersigned (in what may have been the first major (European) yeshivah dedication negotiated in American history). The detailed contract read as follows:

#### B"H

Representative of the Sejm

Rabbi Meir Shapiro of Piotrków

Agreement between the representative of Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin and the donor Mrs. Jennie H. Miller from Philadelphia in the presence of Rabbi Ephraim Eliezer Yolles HaKohein.

The representative of the central Torah institution in Lublin, Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin, in the person of Rabbi Meir Shapiro from Piotrków, is hereby obligated to establish the highest class of the Torah Center in the name of Mrs. Miller.



The conditions are:

1. The representative is obligated to:

- a) Install a proper plaque in the class with all the Jewish and family names that Mrs. Miller will demand.
- b) The plaque will also mention the earnings that Mrs. Miller will obtain by supporting the Yeshiva and the amount of her donation.
- c) After 120 Years, Mishnayos will be studied in her memory for an entire year and each year on her Yahrzeit a commemoration will be held, which will be prefaced by the remarks of the head of the class.

2. Mrs. Miller is obligated to:

- a) To pay out her pledge of \$5,000 in ten monthly installments. Each monthly installment will consist of \$500.
- b) The installments will be paid with \$500 monthly checks on every Rosh Chodesh starting from Erev Rosh Chodesh Shvat and concluding on Erev Rosh Hashana 5688. In exceptional circumstances, the payments can be extended for another two months. In other words, [the full amount should be paid] at the very latest 12 months from today Rosh Chodesh Shvat 5687, January 4, 1927.

Signatures

Rabbi Meir Shapiro

Jennie Miller

Ultimately, in his travels across America, Rav Meir Shapiro visited more than a dozen states, spoke at hundreds of shuls and visited many wealthy prospective donors, but among the \$53,000 he raised on the visit, the largest donation was the one he obtained from Jennie Miller.

### A Very Righteous Woman

The current residents of Jennie Miller's home had never heard of Rav Meir Shapiro or the other gedolim for whom it was a safe harbor in a foreign land. They surely weren't aware of the philanthropic largesse of their home's former owner — but I was about to meet someone who could attest to it firsthand.

It took just a few minutes to reach the Philadelphia Yeshiva; we arrived in time for Minchah, and when it ended, we drove the 95-year old Rosh Yeshiva the three blocks to his home.

Maybe I should have begun with typical niceties, but I was too curious at this point. "Does the Rosh Yeshiva remember a woman named Jennie Miller?" I asked.

Startled, Rav Shmuel turned and faced me. A large smile formed across his face and he exclaimed confidently, "Ah tzadekes gevehn! (She was a very righteous woman)."

I nodded along in agreement. We exited the car and headed for Reb Shmuel's porch, where we continued the conversation on this beautiful spring day. "Did you know," Rav Shmuel said, "that she sent 24 different Torah institutions \$100 checks each month on every Erev Rosh Chodesh?"

He went on to describe the family's relationship with Mrs. Miller. "We got to know her toward the end of her life. She gave us a chair that all of the great gedolim sat in when they visited her. Everyone came. Rav Elchonon [Wasserman], Rav Shimon [Shkop], Rav Boruch Ber [Leibowitz]... there is even a picture of the (sixth) Lubavitcher Rebbe sitting in the chair."

He then invited us inside his home to see the chair. We were introduced to his wife of more than 70 years, Rebbetzin Temi Kamenetsky. "They want to hear about Jennie Miller," he said with delight.

"Such a choshuve lady!" she said with a smile. "How did you come to hear about her?" Rebbetzin Kamenetsky then showed me a worn Tehillim on the table beside her, which Jennie had given her more than a half-century prior, and she continues to use daily.

I told her about the research we'd done and the visit to Jennie's former home earlier that day. Impressed, she went on to tell us more about their relationship. We also discussed a detail I'd encountered numerous times — Jennie's relationship to Rav Akiva Eiger. This was mentioned in several letters from Rav Boruch Ber as well as almost every single letter we have documented from Rav Shimon Shkop, including the blessing

offered at the end of this November 1937 dispatch from Grodno to her second husband Nathan Faggen:

She (Jennie) obligates all the wealthy people of our nation with her righteous acts. She is especially notable for the extraordinary fondness she displays in her support of many holy institutions, including our holy Yeshiva, which she supports consistently on a monthly basis. She is the woman whose pure soul emanated from the shining light of the soul of the doyen of geniuses — the great Cedar of Lebanon who encircled the sun with his height; many giants of Israel nested in his branches, and in his shade, they found solace for their weary souls by listening to his original Torah insights whereby he dismantled and resolved (questions pertaining to) the deepest Sugyos (topics in Talmud) and raised precious gems from the depths the Tamudic ocean — namely, the famous genius Rabbi Akiva Eiger, of blessed memory. May his granddaughter, Mrs. Pesha, be blessed with long life and an abundance of goodness, pleasantness, much delight and nachas always.

Shimon Yehuda HaKohein Shkop

(After consulting several genealogists over the course of the last three years, we have not been able to establish exactly how she was a descendant. Perhaps she was descended from a sibling of Rav Akiva Eiger.)

A few weeks later, I made the trip once again with Gavriel — as well as my brother-in-law Dovi Zauderer, — a close talmid of Rav Shmuel — this time to visit Jennie's kever at the Har Nebo Cemetery, as well as to hear more details about her life from Rav Shmuel and the rebbetzin. Prior to our departure, the rosh yeshiva pointed toward the bookcase.

"We have several seforim here that we received from Mrs. Miller," he said, "including a few that she received as a gift from the Chofetz Chaim's rebbetzin. Why don't you take a look?"

While Rav Shmuel was uncertain as to the exact nature of the connection between the two women, he dropped yet another bombshell: "When Jennie Miller got old and the neighborhood took a turn for the worse, she decided to relocate to a senior community near the shore in Atlantic City. Prior to her departure, she invited us to take whatever possessions remained in her Strawberry Mansion home."

Letters written by Jennie to Rebbetzin Kamenetsky during the last years of her life have been preserved by the family and offer a vivid description of her feelings:

My dear good Friends,

I received your very welcome letter, and I am happy to hear that you are all well. I am also happy to read Rabbi (Kamenetsky) is busy with the Seforim. That makes me feel very good, believe me.

The big bed on third floor maybe would be good for the Yeshiva. The Green dishes in the breakfast room closet are Fleishig. All the pots and pans in the kitchen big closet are Fleishig. All the dishes in kitchen closet are Milchig. Also in the bottom closet are the Milchig pot and pans.

Yes, it's a shame to break up such a good Jewish kosher home, but what can I do; it is G-D's wish for me to be sick and live here (in Atlantic City). For how long I don't know.

My house is not sold as yet — it will take about 60 days....

(I became melancholic as I read these heartfelt letters of a once regal woman, now ailing and isolated, her words revealing the poignant unraveling of her once vibrant life, and I found myself nodding sadly in agreement as I read the last sentence:)

...It was such a holy home.

Let me hear from you. With best wishes

Yours Always

Sincerely,

Jennie Faggen

### The Lost Letters

While the Kamenetskys received some of Jennie's furniture (most notably the chair), the letters did not describe the most valuable possessions that remained in the home.

"In the basement," Rav Shmuel told us, "there were piles of letters and receipts from all the yeshivos of her time, including her personal

correspondence with the Chofetz Chaim, Rav Chaim Ozer, Rav Shimon Shkop, and close to 100 of the greatest gedolim of her time. I did not really appreciate the value of those papers at the time, but it seems that by letting others take them, my family and I lost out on a small fortune.”

Rav Shmuel smiled and added that he had no regrets but figured the correspondence would be of great interest to us. “There are those who still possess these letters — which attest to the incredible respect and admiration that these gedolim had for their benefactor.”

The Rebbetzin reminded Rav Shmuel that the bulk of the letters went to Jennie Miller’s devoted neighbor, Mr. Manfred Mauskopf, a local Talmud Torah principal who had a keen interest in Jewish history. He then nobly did his best to track down the original senders of the letters, but the vast majority of these gedolim, along with their yeshivos, had perished in the Holocaust.

It seems that he donated the rest of the correspondence to various libraries and institutions and in some cases, private individuals — many of whom eventually sold them to collectors and dealers. Little did the great Philadelphia Rosh Yeshivah and his rebbetzin know, but he had just helped us solve yet another mystery.

On our way out, Rav Shmuel asked us if we had any other plans while we were in the area (in his humility, he failed to believe that anyone would travel all the way to Philadelphia just to see him). We informed Rav Shmuel that we had visited Jennie’s kever at the Har Nebo Cemetery and he smiled. “Very nice! A mitzvah! You fulfilled a tremendous mitzvah!” Then he stopped for a moment and informed us in emphatic fashion, which seemed quite unusual for the soft-spoken leader of American Torah Jewry, “A tzadeikes gevehn; she was a tzadeikes, a true tzadeikes. It’s nisht poshut, not simple.”

Before we had departed, we left Rebbetzin Kamenetsky with a small gift: a thin binder filled with various newspaper clippings and letters we’d found during the course of our research. When I called her a few days later to thank her for her time, she told me that she was particularly moved by one article in an interview Jennie had given to the Exponent when she was honored by Bnai Jeshurun in 1953 at its 36th annual dinner. Clearly proud of “her” Jennie, the rebbetzin began to read to me:

She regularly contributes to the support of more than 40 Yeshivos in the United States and Israel. She supported single-handedly a Yeshivah, now situated in Cleveland, during the years when it was still in Europe. Mrs. Miller now sends out each month more than 50 checks for the support of various charitable, religious and educational groups. Closer to home, Mrs. Miller has made herself responsible for many Jewish families in her home area of Strawberry Mansion. She is a regular supporter of Akiba Academy and the Beth Jacob School.

What manner of woman is this? Perhaps the best way to show her as she is, would be to denote her attitude toward herself and others. Simplicity is the keynote of her life. Despite her outstanding position in communal affairs, she is best known as “Aunt Jen,” a name she prefers to any of the honorific titles she has earned. “Aunt Jen” is extremely religious, a devout woman who davens at home when she cannot come to the synagogue. She is a regular attendant at Friday night and Sabbath morning services. During the time of “Selichoth” (penitential prayers), Mrs. Miller regularly attends the services at five a.m. despite her advanced age.

Mrs. Miller lives alone in an 18-room house in the Strawberry Mansion section. This fact has given rise to numerous fearful questionings on the part of her friends, as to her safety and health. To one such question, Mrs. Miller replied, “I don’t live alone. I live with G-d.” To a person of such faith, many doubts and fears which assail others of us are unknown. And this faith has had other effects, as well. It has been said that, without preaching of any kind, Mrs. Miller, has, purely by her own example of Jewish living, been influential in persuading others to join her in her numerous charitable and religious activities.

Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Riff (1893-1976) was responsible for tens of thousands of dollars that flowed from Jennie Miller to yeshivos throughout the world. He was so beloved in Camden that local gentiles could be heard referring to him as he walked by them as “holy father”

## Chapter V: Patroness of the Yeshivah World

It was clear by now that Jennie Miller was a prolific supporter of Torah learning — but what was the source of her enthusiasm for what at the time was hardly a popular cause? Was it just Rabbi Levinthal?

Yet another lead came via Rav Shmuel, who told us that Jennie had been very close to Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Riff, the beloved “chief rabbi” of Camden, New Jersey, situated across the river from Philadelphia. Rav Shmuel suggested that we reach out to his only child, Rebbetzin Rochel (Riff) Gettinger, whom he believed might know more about Jennie.

Rabbi Riff was a scion of the “Bais HaRav,” a descendant of Rav Chaim of Volozhin. During his time studying in the Volozhin Yeshiva, he resided in the home of his grandfather, the Rosh Yeshivah Rav Raphael Shapiro, son-in-law of the Netziv. After marrying his wife Basya (a descendant of Rav Yitzchok Elchonon Spektor), he then took a rabbinic position in Telechin.

Upon his move to America, Rabbi Riff’s leadership impacted far beyond the Camden/Philadelphia area. He served as the vice president of the Agudath Harabonim and was instrumental in the Vaad Hatzalah. However, Rabbi Riff is best remembered for his decades of tireless work on behalf of Ezras Torah where, as successor to Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, he became the source of salvation and sustenance to thousands of bnei Torah across the globe .

The mere mention of the town of Telechin piqued my curiosity. Where had I recently come across it? A swift search through my files revealed the answer to another enigma. In 2022, I had the chance to discuss the Jennie Miller story during a Shabbos meal with Rav Binyomin Carlebach, a son-in-law of Rav Beinush Finkel and one of the current roshei yeshivah at the Mir Yeshivah in Yerushalayim. That serendipitous conversation led to an astonishing discovery.

Mr. Manfred Mauskopf, the aforementioned Talmud Torah principal who had received most of Jennie’s correspondence following her move, sent the Mir Yeshivah a package containing 150 pages of correspondence between the Mir roshei yeshiva and Jennie. The cover letter, dated January 3, 1968, read as follows:

Mirrer Yeshiva  
Jerusalem, Israel

Dear Sir,

I am sending you the enclosed letters which were originally written before the war when your famous institution was still located in Europe. I believe you might be interested in them for historical and sentimental value.

Manfried Mauskopf

This correspondence began a month after Jennie’s initial meeting with Rav Leizer Yudel Finkel and Rav Avraham Kalmanowitz in 1928. The exchange started with an agreement to establish the “Jennie Miller Kollel” at a cost of \$120 per month, a sum that would support ten “rabbinic scholars” in their studies at “The Holy Yeshivah of Mir.”

What caught my attention were two letters written six years later, in 1933, which mention Jennie’s request that the Mir assist two bochorim from Telechin, Eliezer Kobrir and Zev Katarinsky, who hoped to gain acceptance to the yeshivah. I had previously wondered why Jennie was particularly interested in these students. Were they family members? Now, however, I had my answer.

Apparently Rabbi Riff had utilized Jennie’s special connection with the Mir roshei yeshivah to ensure that his former landsleit would receive special treatment. Today it’s all too common for a hopeful student to require “pull” in order to be accepted into an elite yeshivah, but this letter appears to be the first documented case of an American balabos (in this case, a balabusta!) using her influence to arrange admission to a Lithuanian yeshivah.

“She Had Very Good Taste”

Rabbi Riff’s appointment as rabbi of Camden came via the recommendation of Rabbi Bernard Levinthal, who would later write in a tribute article that he seized the opportunity to bring this “unusual

personage” to the Philadelphia area and benefitted greatly from working alongside him for more than 25 years.

(In yet another testament to Rabbi Riff’s greatness, Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky’s children recalled how during their early years in Philadelphia, their parents would take them to Camden to visit the Riff home on Erev Yom Tov to receive a brachah from Rabbi Riff.)

Many decades had passed since Rabbi Riff’s passing, but I hoped that his only child could piece together his connection to Jennie Miller. I was able to reach Rebbetzin Gettinger on the phone that afternoon at her daughter Sarah Ungar’s home in Chicago.

When told of the nature of my call, Rebbetzin Gettinger became excited. She still remembered those visits to Strawberry Mansion with her father in the 1930s, and told me that Jennie had been “a charming woman and a very generous American patriot. She lived in what — at that time — was the aristocratic section of Philadelphia, where there weren’t too many Orthodox people. She was very much influenced by my father to become a big supporter of Ezras Torah and other important (Torah) causes.

“She was the very special type,” Rebbetzin Gettinger continued. “She was the kind of woman who entertained great rabbanim at her home and then would have a chauffeured car take her and her husband to the opera. She was very hospitable. She was particularly interested in supporting talmidei chachamim and their families. She had very good taste in that sense. She was very friendly, in a stately sort of way.”

Jennie certainly appreciated Rabbi Riff as an advisor and mentor, and took his suggestions very seriously. Page through the solicitations and letters sent to Jennie from the various roshei yeshivah and you will repeatedly see Rabbi Riff’s name. Clearly, he was a key conduit between the yeshivos and their donor in Philadelphia.

In 1931, the Ponevezher Rav wrote to Jennie, “Rav Riff from Camden came to visit the Yeshiva and conveyed personal regards from you and your husband. He was shown the building that was bought for Beis Hayeshiva by Pasha bas R’ Yisrael.”

A letter from Rav Avigdor Menkovitz and Rav Mordechai Zev Dzikansky from Yeshiva Ohr Hachaim (the original yeshivah ketanah in Slabodka founded by Rav Tzvi Hirsch Levitan in 1869) dated August 3, 1933, reads: “Rabbi Riff wrote us that to our great regret and sympathy, you lately lost a lot of money. Nevertheless, knowing the great need... of the Yeshivah... your heart was moved like the heart of a true mother of Torah study. You overlooked your own losses and sent your donation for the past four months.”

Another letter sent from the Radin Yeshiva on Tu B’Shevat of 1932 and signed by the Chofetz Chaim thanked Jennie for her \$26 donation that month and asked for the yahrtzeits of her parents, “which will surely be observed when we are informed of the exact names and dates. We hope Rabbi Riff from Camden will write us about this.”

There is also a 1932 letter from Kelm written by Rav Daniel Movshovitz and Rav Gershon Miadnik that references Rabbi Riff as the person who recommended their yeshivah to Jennie, as well as a missive from the editors of a Sefer Hayovelbeing written for Rav Shimon Shkop which requests that Jennie send them Rabbi Riff’s address.

The revived Telshe Yeshiva under Rav Elya Meir Bloch and Rav Chaim Mordechai (Mottel) Katz in Cleveland continued to benefit from Jennie’s largesse

Not only did Rabbi Riff describe the yeshivos and their leaders to Jennie Miller, he would also introduce them to her in person during their visits to Philadelphia.

Rabbi Riff’s grandson, Rav Raphael Moshe Gettinger, shared with me an incredible story about Rav Boruch Ber’s visit to Philadelphia in 1929, part of an 18-month-long trip to America along his son-in-law Rav Reuven Grozovsky, during which he raised a total of \$35,000 to cover the yeshivah’s debts.

As was the tradition, Rabbis Levinthal and Riff arranged for Rav Boruch Ber to deliver a shiur to local community leaders and rabbis at the local Yeshiva Mishkan Israel, after which an appeal for the Kaminetz Yeshiva would be made by Rav Reuven.

Rabbi Riff shared with his grandson, Rav Rephhael Moshe Gettinger, vivid memories of Rav Boruch Ber dazzling the packed building with an intricate shiur on the sugya of areivus (guarantorship) in Masechas Bava Basra (this classic shiur of Rav Boruch Ber is included in his sefer Birkas Shmuel). As Rav Boruch Ber dove into an intricate examination of the different types of cosigners mentioned by the Gemara, Rabbi Riff sat there admiring Rav Boruch Ber’s genius — for this was the perfect setup for a grand-slam fundraising pitch. Rabbi Riff readied himself for what he assumed was the foregone conclusion to the shiur: “Kol yisrael arevim zeh la’zeh, who are the arevim (cosigners) for the bnei Torah back in Europe? It is you, their brethren in America!”

Rav Boruch Ber, however, had other ideas. The fundraising pitch never came. Rav Boruch Ber would never dream of “tarnishing” such a pristine shiur with talk of money. Instead, it was up to Rav Reuven to try and salvage the evening with an appeal of his own.

Rabbi Riff then made sure to help Rav Boruch Ber by personally accompanying him on his appointment with Mrs. Miller later that week.

Samuel Daroff, President of Bnai Jeshurun and the son of a wealthy Volozhin graduate Harry Daroff, participates in the distribution of matzos in Strawberry Mansion before Pesach. Such local tzedakah projects were extremely important to Jennie — and she devoted much of her time to developing and fostering them

Commanded by Rav Chaim Ozer

Sometime later, Rabbi Riff once again traversed the Delaware River in a taxi across the brand-new Benjamin Franklin bridge to pay a visit to Mrs. Miller. His heart was pounding in his chest, for this time was different. Rabbi Riff had been instructed by the gadol hador, Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzenski himself, to seek urgent assistance for the Ramailes Yeshiva, which was teetering on the brink of financial ruin.

Normally, Rabbi Riff would make an appointment with Mrs. Miller before visiting her, but this was an emergency. Rav Chaim Ozer had sent a telegram with strict instructions to act immediately. Rabbi Riff wondered how he would explain the gravity of the situation. Just a short while before, he had introduced Rav Boruch Ber Leibowitz as the greatest Talmudic scholar of his time. How could he now convey the towering stature of Rav Chaim Ozer, the leader of world Jewry?

As he approached Mrs. Miller’s home, he saw her stepping out of her house and getting ready to enter her limousine. His heart sank; he had no choice but to act quickly.

“Where are you headed?” he blurted out, unsure of how to begin. Mrs. Miller replied that she was going to a show. Without thinking, Rabbi Riff quickly said, “Don’t you know that it’s Sefiras Ha’omer, which is a time of mourning for the Jewish people and we don’t attend the theater.”

Mrs. Miller was taken aback. She turned to her driver and said, “John, put away the car, we are not going to the theater today — the rabbi says that it’s better for us not to go.” She then invited Rabbi Riff inside and offered him his usual glass of tea.

They engaged in a brief discussion, and Rabbi Riff made his pitch on behalf of Rav Chaim Ozer, highlighting the stark difference between the two Torah giants of the era.

Mrs. Miller listened attentively to his appeal and then replied, “Of course, dear rabbi, I will make a generous donation. Thank you for your visit!”

The Ramailes Yeshiva would survive, thanks to Mrs. Miller’s generosity and his quick thinking.

As I shared with Rabbi Gettinger the story of the Telshe brochure that had originally alerted me to Jennie Miller, he was reminded of yet another story he’d heard from his illustrious grandfather.

When Rav Elya Meir Bloch and Rav Mottel Katz escaped from Telshe to America in 1940, they sought a suitable place to open up an American branch of the yeshivah. As part of their efforts, they visited Rabbi Riff in Camden.

At some point during the conversation, Jennie Miller’s name was mentioned and the Telzer roshei yeshivah began to describe how the yeshivah and the local economy back in Telshe relied heavily upon the great Philadelphia philanthropist: “Credit was extended to the yeshivah

by local vendors for food and other supplies by virtue of the fact that everyone knew exactly when the monthly allotment from Mrs. Miller would arrive. So much so that if the yeshivah were ever late paying bills, the local merchants would complain, ‘What is going on with the American woman? When do you expect her money to arrive?’ ”

Suddenly, I recalled of one of the first stories that Rav Shmuel had told us about Jennie, back on our first visit to his home:

Every month, on Erev Rosh Chodesh, come rain or shine, a resolute Jennie Miller set out on the short trip from her palatial home on North 33rd Street to the post office at 19th and Oxford Street in the heart of Strawberry Mansion. She carried a handful of postal money orders, lifelines to the Torah institutions across Eastern Europe, Mandatory Palestine as well as a growing list of institutions in America.

By now, she could practically repeat the list of recipients by heart. Mir, Telshe, Ponevezh, Slabodka, Radin, Grodno, Kelm, Chachmei Lublin, Mesivta of Warsaw, Etz Chaim, Merkaz HaRav, Torah Vodaath, RJJ... Each received monthly donations varying from a modest \$10 to a generous \$500. To these institutions, Jennie’s support was more than just a kind gesture; it was the sustenance that kept their doors open, lights on, and students fed.

In return, the yeshivos were quick to acknowledge the timely arrival of these vital funds. Their gratitude, evident in the fervent letters they sent back, was a testament to the importance of Jennie’s unwavering commitment. For them, her punctuality was not only a sign of generosity but also a demonstration of the compassion that bound them together. Her sensitivity towards their plight was evident in the two times a year she visited the post office a few days early, the days prior to Tishrei and Nissan when funds would be needed to pay for Yom Tov necessities.

But even heroes have their moments of weakness. One fateful day, Jennie arrived at the post office just as the last rays of sunlight were disappearing behind the horizon. In her haste, she realized that she had left her money at home. Her heart sank, her eyes filled with tears, and the weight of her mistake threatened to crush her spirit. She imagined the thousands of students in the yeshivos she supported, their hunger gnawing at their insides, all because of her error.

The teller at the post office noticed Jennie’s distress and with a reassuring smile, offered to advance the funds for her, trusting that she would return the next day to make amends for the overdraft — an unheard-of act during the days of the Great Depression. The teller’s gesture was more than a simple act of kindness; it was a testament to the impact of Jennie’s devotion on those who crossed her path.

## **Chapter VI: Loss and Light**

When Harry Miller passed away in 1923, he left his widow with an exorbitant amount of money. But, as Rav Shmuel had alluded during our first visit, a major issue arose. Since the Millers did not merit any children, Jennie could not remarry without first undergoing chalitzah. This should have been a fairly simple halachic procedure, except it seems that Harry’s brother decided that his now wealthy sister-in-law’s religious obligation was his ticket to prosperity.

On every visit I made to Philadelphia, Rav Shmuel emphasized the rare piety of Jennie, mentioning this episode as perhaps the most glaring example: “Her brother-in-law refused to go ahead with the chalitzah unless she agreed to pay him \$150,000! Do you know how much money that was in those days?”

In January 1929, following the chalitzah ceremony, Jennie married for a second time. Her new husband, the 56-year-old widower Nathan Faggen, was an influential Philadelphia businessman who had come to America from Chernigov (current day Ukraine) as a 15-year-old in 1888. He opened a shirt-manufacturing business along with his wife’s family, the Tuttelmans, but eventually went off on his own and opened the Lomar Manufacturing Company, which primarily manufactured men’s sleepwear. A local newspaper wrote that “He was among the first to popularize pajamas among Americans, who had previously retired to sleep in nightshirts.”

More importantly, he shared Jennie’s appreciation for communal work, serving as the president of Bnei Jeshurun as well as the president of the local Vaad Hakashrus and the Yeshiva Ohel Moshe. He also began a regular chavrusa with Rabbi Riff.

We knew from the chalitzah episode as well as other sources that Jennie never had any children of her own. But both Rebbetzin Kamenetsky and Rebbetzin Gettinger alluded to a tragic loss of a child that Jennie suffered during her lifetime, which changed her forever. I assumed that the loss was probably one of her stepchildren via Nathan Faggen (who had six children from his previous marriage), but I was soon to learn otherwise.

In Cherished Memory

The exact nature of Jennie’s life-changing loss was unveiled in an obituary and a series of news stories that ran in the Jewish Exponent in November 1929, regarding 11-year-old Cecelia Cohen. According to a great-niece that I interviewed, Cecelia (Tzirel) was a niece Jennie had “adopted” in infancy and raised as her own. It is unclear how or why that happened, but it seems to have been a gesture of love from her brother Samuel, who’d been blessed with four children of his own and watched his childless sister suffer in her grand, empty home.

This same great-niece (who vividly recalled Jennie from her childhood) shared that her grandfather, Jennie’s brother, was unemployed for a time, and Jennie would send her driver to his home every week to take the family shopping for groceries and occasionally a show.

The young Cecelia, who was “especially gifted and much beloved,” was to appear in the annual Chanukah production at Philadelphia’s Miller Community Center as she did every year. Then, on a Thursday night visit to the home of her neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Cohen, at 1821 North 33rd street:

She stepped into a darkened closet with a lighted candle in hand while playing a game called “fortune-telling.”

A second after she had entered the closet, where another girl attired as a witch was to tell her what the future held in store, Cecelia dashed from the darkened cell, a pillar of flames. The candle had ignited her flimsy masquerade costume.

Mr. Cohen, hearing the child’s screams, dashed in from an adjoining room and smothered the flames with his coat. He then took the child to the Mary J. Drexel Home where she was treated for serious burns about the face, and body. Her condition was reported critical. Mr. Cohen was slightly burned about the hands while smothering the flames.

A few days later, young Cecelia succumbed to her injuries. Her shattered aunt made certain that each yeshivah she supported would honor Cecelia’s memory on her shloshim and every subsequent yahrtzeit, so much so that “Tzirel bas Reb Shlomo Zalman” became a household name in yeshivos across the world.

The revered Rav Meir Shapiro himself recited Kaddish and dedicated an extraordinary shiur to the cherished memory of the girl who had left this world too soon. Year after year, heartfelt letters from Rav Boruch Ber Liebowitz would reach Jennie, conveying the news that he had arranged a deeply meaningful learning session in Cecelia’s memory at his yeshivah.

Another archive contained a letter from Chachmei Lublin sent to Jennie in 1935 following Cecelia’s eighth yahrtzeit:

“Yesterday, the sixth day in Cheshvan, the Yeshivah observed the yahrtzeit of Tzirel bas R. Shlomo Zalman a”h, your brother’s daughter. All the assembled talmidim of the shiur heard the memorial service and stood in honor of the important deceased who is inscribed in fiery letters in the history of Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin.”

Rav Leizer Yudel Finkel wrote of the profound sorrow that weighed upon his soul after the tragic loss of the pure-hearted girl, whom Jennie had raised as a daughter. He assured her that he would personally recite the Kaddish and that the entire yeshivah would study Mishnayos in Cecelia’s memory.

When Ner Israel was founded in Baltimore thanks to the efforts of Rabbi Riff and Rabbi Levinthal, Jennie became a significant benefactor. Rav Ruderman continued the poignant tradition of honoring Cecelia’s memory

by ensuring that a special learning session would be dedicated to the precious soul who had touched so many lives.

While Jennie would spend the rest of her life mourning her dear niece, a distraction arrived soon after the tragedy. She learned that Rav Yosef Yitzchok Schneerson, the Friediker (previous) Lubavitcher Rebbe also known by his initials as the “Rayatz,” would soon be traveling to America, and Philadelphia was to be a stop on his itinerary.

Jennie’s husband Nathan Faggen was (according to several Chabad sources) a relative of Reb Yechezkel “Chatche” Feigin, the famed secretary of the Rebbe who was accompanying him on this trip, and so the Faggens invited the Rebbe and his delegation to stay with them at their home — as well as offering to chair the welcoming committee for the visit.

Throughout the Rayatz’s stay at the Miller-Faggen residence, a diverse array of visitors from across the city came to see him. These included politicians who sought photo opportunities with the revered leader, as well as European immigrants who desired to offer their American-born children a brief encounter with the “old world” that had, sadly, been reduced to little more than folklore, cultural practices, and perhaps culinary traditions for the younger generation.

There were also some encouraging moments involving the steadfast Jews who had preserved their traditions and yearned to simply bask in the presence of their esteemed leader.

It took 50 years for what was perhaps the most heartening moment of the stay to be revealed to the public — when a letter was penned to the Jewish Press in 1980 in response to a comprehensive feature on the Rayatz published a week before.

Dear Editor:

I read with pleasure your article on Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson. I had the great fortune to personally experience this remarkable rabbi’s dedication to helping Jews return to the observance of mitzvot. Even today, many decades later and despite the anemia of old age, I blush when I recall the chutzpah displayed by six of my friends and I towards Rabbi Schneerson, and how we were gently turned around.

It was in 1929, when several articles appeared in various Jewish newspapers available in Philadelphia in those days about one Rabbi Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe. These articles quoted the Rebbe at great length and in much detail. My friends and I read these articles and wondered amongst ourselves whether the Rebbe was actually planning to replace the Al-mighty. We discussed this with an official of our synagogue, and he suggested that we visit the Rebbe and ask him what he had in mind.

One of the articles mentioned that he had been given the use of a house on 33rd Street by Mrs. Faggen-Miller, a woman well-known for her charitable nature. Accordingly, late one Saturday evening, we all piled into the car and drove to the listed address. Our intention was to confront the Rebbe and challenge him that we thought he was trying to displace G-d.

As we climbed the steps to the front porch, we saw through the window that the living room was crowded with men. We rang the doorbell, and a dignified, bearded man came to the door and inquired what we wanted.

One of us responded: “We’d like to speak to the Rebbe. We have an important question to ask.”

All this time the man was taking notes. We subsequently found out that he was Rabbi Yechezkel Feigen, the Rebbe’s personal secretary. “About what?” he said: “The Rebbe must know the question before he can see you.”

“We’d like to know how he expects us to keep an old-fashioned religion in a modern country.” (We knew we couldn’t tell this man our originally intended question.)

...He ushered us into the house, through the crowded living room, and up the stairs. We wondered why we had been admitted before all those people downstairs who had been there before us.

At the top of the stairs stood the Rebbe. He was handsome and saintly looking, with gleaming, bright eyes. He wore a large fur hat. His hand was

outstretched in greeting. I was surprised since I never knew that Chassidic rebbes extended their hands in greeting.

...Once we were seated he took a long look at each one of us and then began: “You look like very intelligent young men, and therefore I must speak on your level. You are wondering about those people downstairs who were here before you. Well, here are some of the problems for which they are asking help.

“One man’s daughter is seriously ill. What can I do? Nothing more than he can do, provided he approaches G-d. He should be able to ask for a complete recovery.

“Another has a lawsuit and wants me to pray that he will win. I do not know who’s right, but he can pray that the L-rd will give justice. There is a man who wants to buy a business and wants me to intercede to make sure it succeeds. If I could do that, I’d be a rich businessman.

“But if I could not answer your question, I’d have no right to be a rabbi.” The Rebbe smiled and continued. “First, I must admit a great secret, which I trust you will most likely keep. There are 613 mitzvot, and while the Lubavitcher Rebbe tries to keep them all, he finds it impossible to keep them all. So what does he do? Discard 613 mitzvot? No, he keeps as many of them as humanly possible.”

With these few words he removed the venom we had brought with us. Then he asked us to try and keep as many mitzvot as we could. If we kept as many as we could, then we’d be doing the same thing as the Lubavitcher Rebbe!

Then he asked for our Jewish names and the names of our mothers. We also offered our legal names and addresses but he said he had no use for them. Several of the boys put their hands in their pockets, but he stopped them with a gesture, thanked us, and said he had no use for money; what he wanted was mitzvot.

He asked us whether we put on tefillin every day. Several admitted they had given up. Whereupon he offered them tefillin so they could fulfill the mitzvah. All of us promised to try to live up to his suggestions. He then blessed us individually and shook hands with us again, and we left. We stood on the porch for nearly two hours digesting the visit.

Everyone agreed to pray at least once a day. One said he would give up his Saturday work as a dental technician, and some months later, he even prevailed upon his employer to do the same.

One of us, Gabriel Lowenthal, of blessed memory, attached himself to a synagogue and taught what he had learned from the Rebbe’s philosophy to many others. I have lost track of some of the boys, but I’m sure that the ten minutes we spent with the Rebbe strengthened the spirit of Judaism for all of us.

The Depression and later World War II gave me little hope of ever gaining more light from Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak. However, I found continued inspiration from his son-in-law, the present Rebbe, to keep as many of the 613 mitzvot as I can.

The timing of Rayatz’s visit coincided with a highly turbulent economic era in American history. His arrival in September saw the Dow Jones Industrial Average plummet by over 40 percent before the year’s end, with no clear signs of recovery.

However, inspired by the presence of the Rebbe and with the encouragement of his wife, Nathan Faggen, who served as the Philadelphia chairman of Agudath Chasdei Chabad, pressed on with the crucial fundraising initiative. His dedication bore fruit, as he oversaw a grand fundraising dinner on December 25th. The event drew over 500 attendees and featured heartfelt speeches from Nathan Faggen, Rabbi Levinthal, and his son Louis. A total of \$15,000 was raised, with the most generous contribution of \$5,000 coming from Jennie, who later raised the donation to \$8,000 plus \$1,000 for the Rebbe personally.

Country of Blessed Refuge

The Rayatz’s historical journey to Philadelphia

While many of Europe’s prewar rabbanim and chassidic rebbes had only negative things to say about America, the Rayatz of Chabad had a

different view. In America, he saw a land of security and potential for spiritual growth.

The Rayatz's links to America and to his Chassidim there were well-established prior to his historic 1929 visit to the United States. Recognizing the necessity of organizing Chabad communities outside of Russia, the Lubavitcher Rebbe had formed Agudas Chassidei Chabad of the USA and Canada and remained in constant contact with his followers there. When the Rebbe was jailed by Communist authorities in 1927, his American chassidim mobilized US government officials to lobby the Soviets for his release.

Upon his arrival in New York, he greeted the waiting crowd with a message that differed from the many rabbinic greats who had looked askance at America, declaring, "May the Al-mighty bless this great country which has been a [place of] refuge for our Jewish People."

On December 15th, the Rayatz boarded a train for Philadelphia, the birthplace of American democracy, where he was invited by Mr. William Thatcher, the secretary of Mayor Harry Mackey, to visit Independence Hall, home of the Liberty Bell.

The Rebbe recorded his impressions of the large parade that accompanied him en route to Independence Hall in his diary: "A few hundred other cars followed us. All the streets were closed and we traveled with a police honor guard (unlike in the past, the one that brought me to Spalerna [prison in the USSR])."

At Independence Hall, the Rebbe was accorded the rare honor of sitting in George Washington's chair and then taken to see the Liberty Bell. The words of the pasuk (Vayikra 25:10) "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" emblazoned across the iconic bell, are a reference to the 50th year of the Yovel cycle, when slaves receive emancipation. The subtle connection was likely noticed by the Rayatz — who was months from his 50th birthday and had recently been freed from a Soviet prison, through pressure from the United States government.

Reflecting on his rescue from Soviet religious oppression, he stated in Yiddish, "I think it is obvious to everyone what a fine impression such a warm and humanitarian reception would have on someone who was imprisoned for his religious and moral endeavors. It is difficult to find the appropriate words of appreciation."

Much of the information that we have on the Rayatz's visit comes from various newspaper reports as well as his journal. Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson, an important Lubavitcher activist who arrived in America in 1925 and laid much of the groundwork for the future of the movement in America, chronicled this visit as well. In his memoirs, he relates that "During his first visit to the United States, the Rayatz became acquainted with the Miller-Faggen family. Mrs. Miller was American born, only spoke English (Rav Shmuel disagreed with this notion), and observed Torah and Mitzvot (according to the level of her knowledge). She was fabulously wealthy and supported Torah institutions with an open hand."

## Chapter VII: The Yeshivah's Moment Arrives

Among those who worked behind the scenes to ensure the success of the Rayatz's visit to Philadelphia was one of the city's preeminent Lubavitcher Chasidim, Rabbi Sholom Schneiderman. A student and close chassid of the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Rashab, he came to Philadelphia in the 1920's to lead a local shul called Dorshei Sholom.

As the Jewish community in Strawberry Mansion grew in the post-World War I era, Jennie realized that vast majority of Jewish children in the neighborhood were not receiving any sort of secondary Jewish education. Therefore, with the encouragement of Rabbi Yolles, Rabbi Riff, and other local rabbis, she decided to open a branch of the Mishkan Israel High School in Strawberry Mansion, called Ohel Moshe. Rabbi Schneiderman was enlisted as dean of the new yeshivah, which opened following Pesach of 1936 at 3001 Berks Street.

Rabbi Schneiderman went beyond the call of duty, working tirelessly to recruit students and introduced them to high level learning. The students were given glimpses of gedolei Yisrael when Rav Elchonon Wasserman and other Torah giants visiting the city, delivered shiurim, and offered chizuk to the students there.

Rabbi Schneiderman proved he could be a strong educator and leader and the high school attracted several local teens, even forging a relationship with RIETS in New York — hoping to attract its graduates to attend a full-time yeshivah in New York. Still, rampant assimilation and the decline of the neighborhood led the yeshivah to struggle for most of its 15 years or so of existence. By 1952, the yeshivah was ready to close its doors.

Behind the scenes, however, plans for another type of yeshivah were brewing.

### A Rebbe with a Vision

In today's yeshivah world, Philadelphia is synonymous with a Lithuanian-style institute of Torah learning. But ironically enough, two of its "founding fathers" belonged to the world of chassidus. One was Chabad chassid Rabbi Sholom Schneiderman. The other was known simply as "the Philadelphia Rebbe."

Along with the Tolner Rebbe, Rav Moshe Tzvi Twersky; and the Monastricher Rebbe, Rav Yaakov Rabinowitz; Rav Moishele Lipshitz was one of several chassidic rebbes who had made Philadelphia their home in the 1920s. (Some locals joked that there were more rebbes in Philadelphia than practicing chassidim).

Reb Moishele was born in the town of Vyeliopoli to his father, Rav Dov Aryeh Liphshitz-Brizel, scion of a rabbinic dynasty. In 1913 he immigrated to America and he began to lead a chassidic court, where he would conduct many tishen and other chassidish-style events. Steadily, he developed a following, and while outside of the city he was known as "The Philadelphia Rebbe," locally he was called "Der Zegster Tzadik" (The Tzaddik of Sixth Street) for his acts of kindness which extended well beyond the confines of his neighborhood. He named his shul Machzikei Hadas (those who strengthen the religion), because that is what he toiled greatly to do, expending much effort on shemiras Shabbos and other areas of Yiddishkeit.

(His son Reb Chaim Uri Lipschitz, later a Rav in Brooklyn and the managing editor of the Jewish Press, was extremely active in galvanizing the local youth, organizing Philadelphia's first branch of Tzeirei Agudath Israel as well as founding Beth Jacob, the first local day school. In both projects he was assisted by Jennie Miller.)

Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky shared with us that during Rabbi Levinthal's lifetime, he resisted attempts to open a proper full-day mesivta or post high school yeshivah in Philadelphia, as he did not want to agitate the local rabbinic leaders, who by then were predominantly Conservative.

Even Bnei Jeshurun, the shul that Jennie and Harry had cofounded (and funded) upon their move to Strawberry Mansion 40 years earlier, reached a point where it debated whether to join the United Synagogue and add mixed-seating pews. One Philadelphian we interviewed pointed out that as soon as an aging Jennie Miller stopped coming to shul, these changes were implemented. As Philadelphia gained a reputation as Conservative Judaism's "capital city," the city's Orthodox future seemed less likely than ever.

Then, upon Rabbi Levinthal's passing in 1952, the torch of leadership was passed to Rabbi Yolles. Rav Moishele Lipschitz determined that the time was ripe to follow the example of the other major Jewish metropolises across America and finally establish a proper yeshivah in Philadelphia.

Rav Moishele Lipschitz, "Der Zegster Tzaddik," made himself relevant toward all Jews, even Albert Einstein in nearby Princeton

Rav Moishele made several visits to Lakewood, where the fledgling Beth Medrash Govoha had proved that Torah learning could in fact take root in America, and beseeched Rav Aharon Kotler and the mashgiach Rav Nosson Wachtfogel to help open a post high school beis medrash in Philadelphia. A proper yeshivah, he believed, could counter the downward surge of the city's Orthodox faction by serving as a spiritual citadel and rallying point for bnei Torah.

But in the yeshivah world, the initial response was skeptical. Anyone familiar with Philadelphia's religious climate considered his quest unrealistic at best.

It was the legendary Rav Nosson Wachtfogel who took Rav Lipschitz seriously. Rav Nosson was always on the lookout for opportunities to expand the horizons of Torah in America, and he was not daunted by what others perceived as insurmountable obstacles. Thus it was he, along with Rav Meir Mintz, who suggested Lakewood talmid Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky for the position of Philadelphia's pioneering rosh yeshivah. While Rav Lipschitz originally hoped to open a post-high school beis medrash, Rav Nosson and Rav Shmuel felt that it was most critical to reach high-school aged boys in assuring the future of Torah Judaism in Philadelphia. Ultimately, the decision was reached to open a pilot beis medrash-level class that would serve as the nucleus around which a high school would subsequently be formed.

This venture could only succeed, however, with the assistance of local rabbanim, whose endorsement would hopefully convince wary residents to embrace the new yeshivah. To this end, Rav Nosson and Rav Meir Mintz worked tirelessly, campaigning and garnering both moral and monetary support, laying the necessary groundwork for the yeshivah to flourish. In a short time, many local rabbanim and leading balabatim were galvanized into action and became strong advocates of the yeshivah's mission.

Meanwhile, it became clear that the monumental task of opening and successfully conducting a yeshivah was not a job for one individual. Rav Shmuel chose Rav Aharon's son-in-law, Rav Dov Schwartzman, who was then delivering chaburos at Mesivta Yeshiva Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin, to be his partner (in 1956 Rav Dov departed and was replaced by Rav Elya Svei).

#### Rav Sholom Hatzaddik

It was not until our third visit with Rav Shmuel that I fully comprehended the role of Rabbi Sholom Schneiderman in the story of the Philadelphia Yeshiva. A few weeks earlier I visited Rav Yechiel Perr, rosh yeshivah of Yeshiva Derech Ayson in Far Rockaway and one of the original beis medrash bochorim sent from Lakewood in December 1953 to help bolster the nascent Philadelphia Yeshiva.

He remembered the name Jennie Miller and recalled some basic facts about her charitable giving. But it was when we began discussing Rav Sholom Schneiderman that his eyes lit up. "Rav Sholom was a real tzaddik!" he said fervently. "He was the one who obtained a building for the yeshivah and then took responsibility for the yeshivah's fundraising." Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky later filled out the story: When the idea surfaced to establish the new yeshivah, Rabbi Schneiderman immediately embraced the project by offering the building that housed his shul and Talmud Torah at 3003 West Berks Street in Strawberry Mansion to serve as the yeshivah's first home — cost free. Not only that, but he was also wise enough to make the offer covertly, lest it raise the ire of the yeshivah's many opponents.

And so it was, on Chanukah 5714 / December 1953, that nine bochorim harking from various mesivtos in New York, convened in the Talmud Torah building for their first zeman at the Talmudical Yeshiva of Philadelphia. That structure would serve the multiple functions of beis medrash, dormitory, kitchen, and dining room. It was also host to a shiur from Rav Aharon Kotler.

Jennie Miller was no longer a wealthy woman at that point, but she still played in a role in the development of the yeshivah. "She was so excited to have the yeshivah there and offered whatever she could to help," Rav Shmuel said. "She even bought the yeshivah its first Shas and would regularly ask what the students were learning!"

Now it was my turn to put on my historian cap and speak up. The Hashgachah here was unmistakable. In 1903, the Ridbaz had pleaded with the residents of Philadelphia to establish a yeshivah in town. With the support of the Millers, Rabbi Levinthal heeded the message, opening advanced Talmud Torahs like Mishkan Israel and later Ohel Moshe to serve the older boys who were ready to learn Gemara.

But the people of Philadelphia never completed the task of opening a proper, full-day yeshivah. As a result, Torah Judaism in the city did not fully flourish.

Yet exactly 50 years later, in the same building complex that once housed Ohel Moshe, the Ridbaz's call was finally heeded with the founding of a yeshivah that would become renowned — not just in Philadelphia but across the world.

Sadly, Rabbi Sholom Schneiderman did not live to see the fruits of his toil. On March 4, 1955, en route to a fundraising event for the new yeshivah, he was struck by a car while crossing the street at the busy intersection of North 9th and Roosevelt Boulevard. With emotion, Rav Perr recalled sitting at his bedside as this saintly figure who had devoted his life to Torah writhed in pain. Shortly thereafter, on March 15th, he passed away.

Rav Sholom and his Rebbetzin Charna, who both toiled for Torah and for the community, were not blessed with children of their own. Their legacy lives on in the Philadelphia Yeshiva and its talmidim.

And he has a namesake as well: Just a few months after his passing, Rebbetzin Temi Kamenetsky gave birth to a son, who was named Sholom. Today, Rav Sholom Kamenetsky serves as one of Philadelphia's roshei yeshivah alongside his father shlita.

#### The Hanhalah of the Philadelphia Yeshiva in 1964

The yeshivah grew steadily, and in 1956 it moved from Strawberry Mansion to its current campus. Throughout those years and even after Jennie's move to Atlantic City a short while after, the Kamenetsky family maintained a close relationship with her, writing letters and visiting her whenever they could.

Jennie passed away on September 4, 1968. It remains unknown exactly how many people beyond her immediate family attended her funeral, but it is clear that the event was small and quiet.

Recently, a member of the Philadelphia community suggested that I reach out to a local resident named Arthur Rosenthal. He had grown up right outside Strawberry Mansion and knew a story about Jennie that he thought I'd appreciate. He was right.

When Jennie passed away, Arthur told me, she was left with very little money; her last dollars were spent on medical care following a stroke she suffered during her final years. Following her passing, her relatives arranged for a small, simple matzeivah; they were not wealthy people and couldn't afford anything too stately.

When they contacted Wertheimer-Liberty Monuments to make the arrangements, Morris Wertheimer, one of the proprietors of the multi-generational business, inquired as to the identity of the deceased. When he found out that it was Jennie Miller Faggen, he scrapped their plans for a simple headstone, saying, "A woman like that deserves something better." He then upgraded the matzeivah to a large, prominent one befitting a great woman.

On a recent visit to Rav Shmuel, he summed it up best.

"What is the legacy of Jennie Miller?" I asked. The rosh yeshivah paused and then said clearly: "She was a great tzadeikes, there's no sh'eilah (question) about that. People can learn from her to be erliche froyen (upright women), erliche menschen (upright people), but her true legacy is that she gave everything away. Her life was the yeshivos that she helped. She lived on the tzedakah that she gave."

Finally, I asked Rav Shmuel the question that had long tugged at the edge of my consciousness, the question that likely spurred this long, convoluted search through archives and graveyards, unveiling and untangling hidden skeins of a century of history: "How is it possible that a woman with so many zechusim, a woman who accrued such merit, has been almost completely forgotten?"

He smiled. "Who knows?" he said. "But whatever you can do for the aliyah of her neshamah — she deserves it. It's a mitzvah to publicize her story. She was a true tzadeikes who did so much for Klal Yisrael."

"A tzadeikes gevehn; she was a tzadeikes, a true tzadeikes. It's nisht poshut, not simple." — Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky

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## A House of Celebration and Houses of Mourning

By Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

When my cousin's daughter asked me to officiate her wedding in Israel the week after Sukkos, how could I say no? Her mother, my beloved first cousin, passed away at a young age from cancer. She loved Israel and at several points in her too-short life wanted to live there but never had the chance to realize that dream. Her daughter, passionate about Torah, the Jewish people, and Eretz Yisroel, moved to Israel shortly after getting up from shiva. She enlisted, rose to be an officer in the IDF, and proudly wore her olive green IDF skirt throughout. She met her husband, an amazing young man who, like her and like Avraham Avinu before them, got up, left his family to answer the call of Lech Lecha, and went to settle in Hashem's land. After learning in Yeshiva he too served in the IDF. These two beautiful souls finding each other and committing to building the Jewish people in the Jewish homeland was truly a special occasion not to be missed.

And now, at a magnificent chuppa with the hills of Yerushalayim as the backdrop, I had the tremendous honor and privilege to marry them. But there was something I needed to do first.

In Koheles (7:2), Shlomo HaMelech, the wisest of all men, taught, טוֹב לָבוֹא לְלֵקֶת אֶל בַּיִת אֲבֵל מִלֵּקֶת אֶל בַּיִת מִשְׂתֵּחַ בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא סוּף כֹּל הָאָדָם וְהָסִי יָמוּן אֶל לְבוֹ, "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of celebration; for that is the end of every man, and a living one should take it to heart."

As Israel's longest war in its history continues to rage on across multiple fronts, we tragically, regularly continue to see and hear the most dreaded words: "Released for publication." Heroic, seemingly ordinary but truly extraordinary soldiers continue to make the ultimate sacrifice, their families paying the ultimate price to protect, defend and fight for the Jewish people. Indeed, as our rabbis taught two thousand years ago (Berachos 5a), Eretz Yisroel nikneis b'yesurin, the land of Israel is acquired and held with sacrifice and struggle.

I paid a shiva call to the family of Rav Avi Goldberg Hy"d. A tent was set up to accommodate the countless visitors who came from all over: friends, family, political leaders, and "strangers" like me who came to comfort, share in the pain and pay tribute to this incredibly special man. It was heartbreaking to see his children clutch framed pictures of him. It was moving to hear his wife Rachel talk about him and offer a heartfelt plea for all segments of Am Yisroel to share in the burden of this war. R' Avi loved and excelled at music, using it to arouse the souls of many, and so the family requested music be part of the shiva. Accompanied by a guitar and a violin, the many packed in the tent joined in a slow, stirring niggun. At that moment, eyes closed and swaying in unison, all those gathered were singing the song of the Jewish people, the song of pain and of joy, a song of eternity.

That day, I was scheduled to meet with R' Avi's brother Eliezer about another matter. We indeed met, but instead of at a coffee shop or in an office, it was with him sitting in a low chair and my desperately trying to find words that would be meaningful. He shared about his brother's special character and impact and I communicated that I represented not only myself, my family and our community, but I was there on behalf of all Am Yisrael around the world sharing in their pain and expressing our boundless gratitude.

I shared the same message at the second shiva call, to the family of Sammy Harari Hy"d. Sammy came to yeshiva for his gap year and decided to stay and serve in the IDF and build his life in Israel. His dedication to our people and to our country was unwavering. He was 35 years old and lived in Tzefat with his wife, Anna, and their three children.

"It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of celebration." Commentators explain that Shlomo HaMelech encouraged going to a shiva home over a simcha because a simcha is prospective. We share our hope, dreams and ambitions for the future of this new couple, this Bar Mitzvah boy or Bat Mitzvah girl, this new baby. A shiva home is retrospective, reflective of the legacy, influence and impact the person made. Each of these precious soldiers, our kedoshim who are now sitting next to the Kisei HaKavod, directly adjacent to Hashem's throne, leave the highest legacy of having been moseir nefesh for the Jewish people.

On this short trip, I also visited Hadassah Hospital to spend time with injured soldiers. Unlike previous trips in which the injured were young soldiers in the middle of their mandatory service, each of those I visited this time was a reservist, these were people who had left their family multiple times to fight, often on different fronts.

In one room were three men who had been injured less than a week before in Lebanon. Hezbollah fighters saw them coming and released gas in the house they were entering. In many countries, gas companies add a chemical with a distinctive smell to alert people to a gas leak but natural gas has no odor and so these soldiers had no idea they were entering a home filled with gas. Protocol calls for opening fire when entering an area with terrorists. When these soldiers entered the home and the first one opened fire, it ignited the gas, causing an explosion. The terrorists were positioned nearby and opened fire after the explosion. One of the soldier's legs was literally on fire while he continued to shoot back and fight the terrorists.

Hanging next to his hospital bed are the remnants of the uniform, a testament to the miracle of his being alive. These soldiers had bandages on their legs, fingers and one had burns on his face. One of them has four children, the youngest two months old, born during his service. Another got married in between serving his reserve duties. They all spoke with faith, determination, gratitude, positivity and a message to Jews everywhere that it is time to come home and be part of this destiny.

In another room was a soldier who was injured on Yom Kippur night in Lebanon. His father shared that he was so badly compromised, losing so much blood, that at one point they felt he wouldn't survive and no more resources or time should be spent on him. Nevertheless, they continued and there he was recovering and improving, eager to return home to his wife and children. The soldier mentioned that in his life he had donated a lot of blood, never knowing that he was actually making a deposit for one day needing to take a withdrawal to save his life. As hashgacha had it, his uncle is a friend of mine, someone I went to Yeshiva with.

In a third room was a soldier injured on the border with Syria. He was the quietist, and seemed to be struggling the most physically and emotionally, but after spending a few minutes, showering him with love, as we were leaving his room, he perked up to call to us and say, "Am Yisrael Chai."

On this trip, I spent time with my heroic friend who fought in Gaza, saw and experienced horrific things, and has been suffering with diagnosed PTSD. Despite support, medication, and therapy, he continues to have panic attacks, and it isn't unusual for him to wake up in the middle of the night from a nightmare, drenched in sweat and with a racing heart.

He shared with me that he had recently been in the park with his children when they saw a young boy on the playground crying. He approached the boy asking what is wrong, is he hurt. The boy responded, no I am angry and there is nothing you can do about it. He asked the boy what happened and the young boy explained that his father is back in milu'im, reserve duty, and his uncle picked him up from school instead of his father and he is very upset about it. My friend said, are you hungry, let's go buy a treat and the boy said, no I am not eating. He asked, why not and the boy said, I don't want to eat until my father comes home and we can eat together.



After spending some time showing some love and support, the boy calmed down and went home to get something to eat. There are literally thousands of children in Israel like this young boy, some expressing their feelings, many not, and we cannot lose sight of how many families continue to feel the impact of this war on a daily basis.

This past year I have been fortunate to have gone to Israel for numerous missions, visiting army bases, hospitals, hostage families, displaced families, and doing all kinds of volunteering. As Yom Tov here ended and I prepared for this trip, I thought, perhaps naively, that I was going for a wedding and to see my family. I thought that the chamals, cheder milchamah, the wartime volunteer command centers were closed, the volunteer opportunities had grinded to a halt, but I was terribly wrong. There is still so much to do, so much love to show and share, so much support, financial, emotional to provide, so many people to spend time with.

The director of Hadassah hospital told me that visits have slowed down but there are still so many soldiers recovering and in rehab who cherish the chance to tell their story, to receive some love and to connect with Jews, particularly from outside of Israel.

It has now been more than a year. Fatigue may have set in for many, but it can't for our soldiers. They are still fighting on multiple fronts, their families continue to have to experience and navigate their absence while they serve. For the new orphans and widows there is nothing old about this war.

They are doing their part. We must continue to do ours. A member of our community visited an army rest area outside Gaza over Sukkos. One of the tables still holds a letter a child wrote that we delivered back in March.

Continue to write letters to soldiers. Continue to learn and daven for those serving and all those injured physically and emotionally. When planning winter vacation or your next trip, consider going to Israel to visit hospitals, those still displaced from the north, or army bases.

We daven and long for the day that we go to Israel only to attend simchas and happy occasions.

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### **Rabbi Yochanan Zweig**

**This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Reuven ben Yosef.**

For Heaven Sake!

Avram took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all their belongings, as well as the people they had made, and they left – heading toward Canaan (12:5).

Rashi (ad loc) explains that “the people they had made” refers to gathering them “under the wings of the Divine Presence.” Rashi goes on to say that Avraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women, and that the Torah considers those conversions as if Avraham and Sarah had “made” them.

Rambam (Yad Avodah Zara 1:3) elaborates on this theme. He relates that once Avraham recognized Hashem he began to admonish the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim, telling them that they were not following the proper path. He went on to break their idols and to teach them that it is only fitting to serve the God of the world; to Him alone is it fitting to bow down and offer sacrifices and libations. All idols and images must be destroyed lest others err.

Raavad (ad loc) wonders why it is that only Avraham made it a point to protest the idolatrous behavior of others and set about to destroy their

idols? After all, there were others alive at that time, notably Shem and his grandson Ever, who knew the truth. They both recognized Hashem; why didn't they protest or make it their mission to destroy idols?

Raavad goes on to suggest that perhaps they did protest, and that the idolaters hid their idols. Avraham, however, had the opportunity to break his father's own idols. This is a difficult answer to accept as it presupposes facts about Shem and Ever for which we have no evidence.

Rambam refers to Avraham as a “pillar of the world.” Clearly, he stood out even when compared to the greatness of those before him. But what made Avraham so unique?

Rashi (24:7) explains Avraham's impact on the world: Prior to Avraham, Hashem was only the God of the heavens. However, once Avraham made everyone aware of the presence of Hashem, He became God of the earth as well. In other words, Avraham was different from all who preceded him in that he made it his mission to ensure everyone recognized Hashem as the one and only God. All the great men who preceded him were content to focus on the proper way to live as a subject of Hashem; they weren't, however, concerned with bringing Hashem down to the earthly realm.

This explains why Maimonides only credits Avraham Avinu with trying to convince others to his way of thinking and actively destroying idol worship. Avraham's mission was to bring the knowledge of Hashem to the rest of the world. This is his legacy and that of the Jewish people as well.

Remarkably, one of those great men – Shem (called Malki-Tzedek in this week's parsha; see Rashi 14:18) – is the first one who uses this appellation to describe Hashem (“Possessor of Heaven and Earth”) in his blessing to Avraham Avinu.

Avraham had just miraculously defeated the most powerful army on earth. Shem observed that Avraham had now shown the entire known world the dominance of Hashem, and that Hashem's active presence could now be felt on earth as well.

Teaching: Lessons for Life

Then And Avraham heard that his brother had been taken captive, and he mobilized his disciples (14:14).

Avraham was informed that Lot, his brother-in-law, had been taken captive by the army of the four kings. He quickly mobilized his fighting force of 318 men, soundly defeated the invaders, and brought back Lot and all the property that had been seized.

The word that the Torah uses to refer to students is “chanichav” – the root being chinuch, commonly translated as education. Rashi (ad loc) explains that this refers to those whom Avraham had “initiated” to mitzvos. Rashi goes on to explain why chinuch refers to education; “This is a language of beginning of the entry, of a person or a vessel to a future use that they will be destined to stay.”

Therefore, the primary goal of chinuch is to initiate a student to the path on which he will stay. This understanding of chinuch is a big departure from how most of our education systems operate today. Most schools measure the success of their educational programs quantitatively: How much material did the students absorb? How does this compare with other schools? What is the average score of a given class on their standardized tests and how does this compare nationally?

In reality, these school administrators are asking all the wrong questions. Of course, it is important to have a metric for properly measuring outcomes of educational programs. But the questions they should be

asking are: Have we instilled within our students a love for learning that will put them on the path for lifelong learning? Have we inspired within our students a love for Judaism and its core values so that they will want to make it a meaningful part of their lives long after they leave our school?

In other words, most schools miss the point. Though we can force students to learn information for a few years, if the knowledge acquired or the process of learning isn't inspiring, we can be assured that they will abandon it shortly after they leave our charge.

This is how American Jews lost a whole generation of students in the 1940's and 50's who went to cheder and other after school programs. These programs were almost always staffed with very knowledgeable but totally unrelatable (and elderly) European teachers. Their methods didn't speak to the American mentality and nearly all who attended those programs learned that Judaism isn't for the 20th century American. Sadly, they abandoned their heritage and most every vestige of Judaism. The devastation that this caused is obvious; more than half of Halachic Jews (those born to a Jewish mother) have nothing to do with Judaism and (sadly) will slowly disappear over the next few decades.

Unfortunately, we are, by and large, failing a significant portion of today's student population as well. In today's "exciting" world, our children have literally everything at their fingertips. Now, more than ever before,

knowledge is a short Google query away. Yet, our schools' primary focus is mired in imparting information. Even when our students are successful in absorbing all the material, we usually fail poorly in making the material inspiring and uplifting.

We aren't training our teachers to inspire, we are simply giving them better methods for conveying information. Our schools have forgotten the key definition of chinuch is really the responsibility for setting students on the path that they are destined to be. No wonder so many of our students have "gone off the derech;" we never properly put them on the right path in the first place! In fact, as bad as the situation is, we should be thankful that it isn't worse. This isn't a situation that will repair itself, we need a paradigm shift, and quickly.

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לע"נ

שרה מנשה בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה  
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה  
אנא מלכה בת ישראל