

# Be a Jew's Angel

Category: Bereishis, Vayechi

*When two Chabad teenagers were spreading the message of Chanukah, they didn't expect to have a reunion with a long-lost friend.*

## An Unexpected Reunion

Good Shabbos!

On a recent Chanukah, two young Chabad women in New York hit the city's subway system armed with Chanukah kits. They were looking for Jewish passengers so that they could offer them free menorahs and candles to take home to do the mitzvah of lighting the menorah. If someone said that they already had menorahs, the girls offered chocolate Chanukah gelt or dreidels instead.

At one of the stations, they overheard two women talking to each other, "Hey, look who's here! He's a famous Hollywood actor!" So the young Chabadnik, of course, wanted to know if the actor was Jewish, so she asked the woman what the guy's name was. She said, "That's Liev Schreiber!"

It was a name she recognized immediately, but not from movies. She approached him and introduced herself as Bunya Laskey. Mr. Schreiber immediately smiled and said that he remembers her father well. Right there on a New York City subway platform, the famous actor and the Lubavitch teenager had a long conversation, with everyone around them wondering how these two could have any connection.

The story starts like this.

## The Boy with Long Hair

One spring Friday afternoon in 1976, a yeshivah student named Arye Leib Laskey on a "Mitzvah Tank" in New York City noticed a mother and daughter who seemed Jewish. He got off the Tank, approached the little girl (who was eight years old), offered her Shabbos candles, and told her, "Shabbos candles are a very nice thing for a nice Jewish girl to light!" To his surprise, she responded,

“I’m a boy!”

And that’s how a relationship was formed between a Chabad yeshivah student named Arye Leib Laskey and a long-haired boy named Schreiber and his mother.

Aryeh Leib invited him to attend the Released Time program each Wednesday.

New York State law allows public schools to release Jewish students for one hour a week for religious education. In 1940, the Previous Rebbe founded a program where Jewish kids were picked up each week, marched over to the nearest synagogue, and taught the basics of Judaism. It is something like Hebrew School, and it has remained active until today.

So in 1976, Arye Leib Laskey invited his new eight-year-old friend to attend. As a result, young Mr. Schreiber also visited 770, got to see the Rebbe, and even got coins for tzedakah as was the Rebbe’s custom for pre-Bar Mitzvah boys at the time. Arye Leib Laskey remembers how they were once in 770 when someone shouted at them, “When are you getting an upshernish?”

Over time, Arye Leib became friends with the family, and discovered that the boy was living with his mother on Manhattan’s East Side, in a poverty-stricken apartment that sometimes didn’t have electricity or hot water. Arye Leib also saw to it that the boy went to the Gan Israel overnight camp in upstate New York in the summer of 1976.

But then, Arye Leib went on to the Chabad yeshivah in Morristown, New Jersey and they lost contact.

## **The Non-Bar-Mitzvah**

A few years went by and Arye Leib Laskey found himself a student in 770. One day, someone walked in and informed him that he had met a smart 13-year-old kid in Manhattan who had told him that he has a Chasidic “big brother” named Arye Leib Laskey. The boy had even given him his phone number, to allow him to reestablish contact with him. The number belonged to young Mr. Schreiber’s Jewish grandparents, who were now raising him.

Arye Leib Laskey lost no time getting in contact with them, and offered to conduct a Bar Mitzvah for him. But the grandfather was an avowed Communist and said,

“No way! My grandson will not have a Bar Mitzvah!”

So one day, Mr. Laskey suggested to the grandfather that instead of a Bar Mitzvah, he take his grandson to 770 to get an Aliyah to the Torah in the Rebbe’s minyan. To his surprise, the grandfather agreed to it—Bar Mitzvah, not, but Aliyah to the Torah in 770, yes.

And so, several days later, young Mr. Schreiber arrived at 770 with his grandfather in the morning and got an aliyah before the Rebbe’s Aliyah. Mr. Laskey even organized a small party—but warned all the students involved that no one should (G-d forbid!) mention the phrase, “Bar Mitzvah.”

And indeed, after the Rebbe’s minyan, the students put young Mr. Scheiber on their shoulders and danced with him—and his grandfather stood by and wept out of emotion. A short time later, their connection was lost again.

Now, Chabad has another organization called Chabad’s Children of Chernobyl. This is an organization that, at the Rebbe’s behest, has to date rescued around 3,000 Jewish children from the region of the Chernobyl nuclear accident, flying them to Israel and other countries for treatment and resettlement.

At its 2013 fundraising dinner, the recipient of the “Children at Heart” award was none other than young Mr. Schreiber, who had since taken the first name Leiv—and in his speech, he talked about his Chasidic big brother, Arye Leib Laskey.

And more recently, who should run into Liev Schreiber on a New York City subway platform but the daughter of the young man who once saw to it that a little boy with long hair get an aliyah at the Rebbe’s minyan.

## **Yosef’s Faith**

And that brings us right to this week’s Torah portion.

In the Parshah of Vayechi, after Yaakov Avinu passes away, we read how Yosef reassures his brothers that he holds no grudges against them. He declares his faith that G-d destined him to be in Egypt, and it was all the hand of G-d.

When people read this, they might think, “Sure, when you are basically the king

of Egypt, you could easily say, 'Yup, everything's from G-d!' He was on top of the world and could do and have anything he wanted! What if he had met his brothers while he was still in prison? Would he have also said then that everything is from G-d?"

The answer is that Yosef did indeed never lose his hope; he was a perpetual optimist because he truly believed, at all times, that everything was the hand of G-d.

Yosef saw that while he had indeed been sold as a slave to Potiphar, he still managed to charm his boss to the point that he was appointed manager of the entire estate. And even when he was thrown into the pit, seemingly from the garbage can to the landfill, he didn't despair because even then, he still managed to impress the warden. So Yosef deduced that it wasn't a punishment at all but rather, a Divine mission for a very important purpose, although he didn't know at the time what that purpose was.

## **Hand of G-d in Dosan**

Even before this entire episode, when we look at how the whole saga began, we discover G-d's Hand as well.

At the beginning of the Parshah of Vayeishev, Yaakov turns to Yosef and says, "Please go and see the welfare of your brothers." Why was Yaakov suddenly concerned about his sons' welfare? The Targum Yerushalmi points out that they had gone to Shechem, the place where the whole episode with Dinah had occurred, so Yaakov was now concerned that the people of Shechem might take revenge for their killing of Chamor, Shechem and the rest of the city.

Yosef replies, "Hineini!" "Yes, sir!" and off he goes to Shechem. But once there, he doesn't find his brothers.

And then, the Torah (Bereishis 37:15) writes something unusual: "Then a man found him, and behold, he was straying in the field, and the man asked him, saying, 'What are you looking for?'"

Generally, when you are lost, you approach a someone for directions, not the other way around. It would have made much more sense for Yosef to have sought

out the man and to ask him, “Have you seen a group of shepherds? They’re my brothers, and I’m looking for them...” But that’s not what happened. On the contrary—the man found *him* and approached *him*, asking, “What are *you* looking for?”

Yosef replies that he is looking for his brothers, and the man answers that they had gone to Dosan. Targum Yerushalmi tells us that the “man” also informed Yosef that his brothers had heard that the locals were planning on attacking them so they had gone off to Dosan instead. So, Yosef followed them to Dosan—and the rest is history.

Who was this “man” who changed the entire history of the Jewish Nation? Obviously, if Yosef had not found his brothers, he simply would have gone back home to their father Yaakov—and we would have prevented the entire Egyptian Exile!

Well, Rashi tells us that this “man” was actually none other than Malach Gavriel, the archangel Gabriel.

The Ramban explains that Torah describes this at length to inform us that Yosef had many reasons to turn around. Many things could have gone wrong in the story. But the story was all planned out by G-d - Yosef’s sale and descent into Egypt - so G-d ensured that someone would be there to make sure that the story plays out correctly.

## **Be An Angel**

In our day and age, Arye Leib Laskey was one such “man”—he was the angel who sought out that eight-year-old Jewish boy with flowing locks that one Friday afternoon. Neither the boy nor his mother sought him out. They were going about their business, but an “angel” saw a Jewish child “lost in the field,” And right there in the “field,” the “man” met that little boy and asked, “What are you looking for?” What is it that you’re looking for, and where will you find it? And so, 40 years went by, and the very daughter of the same angel is the one who meets Liev Schreiber and reminds him again that today is Chanukah and that we need to light the menorah.

The lesson, my friends, is this: Each and every one of us can be that angel who

meets a Jew “straying in the field,” in this great wide and overwhelming world, and asks him or her, “What are you looking for?” We can be the ones who help them discover what it is they are really looking for. One may think they want to be a Hollywood actor—but what he’s really looking for is a menorah and candles, to light the Chanukah lights.

Go out there and be an angel, and to help a fellow Jew.

Good Shabbos!