

בס"ד

Shluchim Sermons



Vayikra

From Christiansen to Abrahamson

It took twenty years, but a long wait paid off and he was able to embrace Judaism, thanks to the embrace of the Rebbe's shluchim.

In 1990, my brother Rabbi Yosef Greenberg moved to Alaska with his wife Estie to serve as the Rebbe's Shluchim there. Three months after their departure, they suddenly appeared in 770 with a sixty-year-old couple. The wife was Jewish, and the husband—Mr. Harling Christiansen—had come to undergo a Halachic conversion. I remember being quite impressed that in just three months, a family was already prepared to embrace a life of Jewish observance.

He went through the conversion process and he adopted the name Yisro, after discovering in the course of his learning that Yisro had also converted to the Jewish faith. This fellow, Yisro, was lively and personable, and everyone in 770 became friendly with him.

Six months later, my brother returned with the couple once again, this time to hold a Jewish wedding. It was impressive; traveling from Alaska to New York is no short journey even today, and thirty years ago, it was even longer.

But there was more to the story.

Twenty Years of Patience

This week, my brother married off his daughter and published a teshura, a memento for the occasion, where he wrote about the

history of Chabad work in Alaska. I discovered that the Rebbe's connection to Alaskan Jews already began in 1970.

When the Rebbe arrived in America in the 1940's, he established Merkos Shlichus, a program which sends pairs of Rabbinical students each summer to far-flung locales which don't have established Jewish communities. The students connect with the local Jews and serve as their yearly "Jewish connection." This is like the Chabad Peace Corp!

In 1970, Rabbi Hodakov, the Rebbe's secretary, made an announcement: Chabad would be going, for the first time, to Alaska. A pair of students was sent to visit the state, and in Anchorage they met an interfaith family — the wife and her son were Jewish but the husband was not. The son put on Tefillin with the boys, and the father — this Harling Christiansen — shared that he was the president of the local Reform Temple. He was very fond of Judaism; he studied Chumash, Pirkei Avot, and whatever books he was able to get his hands on. He was interested in undergoing a Halachic conversion, but they informed him that they wouldn't be able to provide that service — a full Rabbinical court would be necessary. The students became quite close with the family.

Upon their return, they wrote a report to the Rebbe about the fellow who wished to convert, and they also reported that a successful local Jewish businessman was willing to cover the cost of a full time Chabad representative.

Harling also wrote to the Rebbe, thanking him for sending the Yeshiva students. "Words fail to describe the depth of my feelings for what they practice and teach," he wrote. "I am forever indebted to them," he said, for teaching him the true meaning of a Torah life. He concluded his letter by committing to continue his studies until the time he would be able to live a full Jewish life.

He sent a copy of his letter to the Yeshiva students. Some time later,

the Rebbe's secretary showed the students the letter which the Rebbe had received. On the envelope, the Rebbe circled his name and wrote next to it: Yehudi?

This Harling kept up his hope to convert for twenty years. Whenever rabbis or Yeshiva students would visit Alaska, he would ask them to convert him, but they would always respond with the same answer: a full Jewish court would be necessary.

This continued until my brother arrived in Alaska. Harling connected with him from the first moment and helped him establish himself in Anchorage. He repeated his request to my brother: "I want to convert to Judaism." As expected, my brother said that a rabbinical court would be necessary, and that would only be possible in New York. He responded that he would be willing to travel to New York and to do whatever was necessary to make it happen.

He finally managed to fulfill his life's wish. They came to New York, he converted, and then approached the Rebbe at dollars and received a very warm blessing. He asked the Rebbe if he should change his last name, Christiansen, and the Rebbe said, "Yes, definitely." He changed his family name to Ben Avraham (Abrahamson.)

He returned to Alaska and grew a long white beard. Whenever tourists would visit the Chabad House, they would immediately approach the man with a long white beard, thinking that he was the rabbi. He would point with amusement to the young shliach, and say, "He is the Rabbi around here."

A Call of Love

Last week, we finished the book of Shemos, and this week we begin Vayikra, which is also known as "the book of sacrifices." It begins with the words, "And G-d called to Moses, and He spoke to him from the Tent of Gathering." Rashi was puzzled by the double statement, that

G-d first called to Moses and then spoke to him. As the Rebbe put the question, “These words seem entirely superfluous. The verse could have simply stated, ‘G-d spoke to Moses.’ Why does it say that G-d called to him? Rashi explains that it is a term of endearment.” The verse adds those extra words to tell us about G-d’s love for Moses.

How does Rashi know that the word Vayikra is a term of endearment? Indeed, those words are extra in this verse, but on what basis does he interpret it as an expression of love?

The Rebbe explains that Rashi based his interpretation on a famous line that we recite during the repetition of the Amidah: “Rashi cites a different verse, which tells us that the angels use this term, ‘*vekarah zeh el zeh v’amar.*’ Angels do not have any sense of hatred or jealousy, so the term must be an expression of love. That was Rashi’s proof.”

Then, the Rebbe adds another point: “Why was Moses so beloved to G-d? Perhaps it was not because of his prophecy, but because of his connection to the Jewish people.” (Toras Menachem 5742 pg. 324).

Moses was beloved to G-d because he represented the Jewish people. When the Jews fashioned a Golden calf, G-d told Moses, “Go down.” Rashi explains that G-d said, “Descend from your greatness, because I gave you greatness only in their merit.” Here too, when G-d shows his endearment for Moses, it is a result of His endearment for the entire People of Israel.

This Wednesday, we will mark Yud Alef Nissan, the Rebbe’s 119th birthday – the beginning of his 120th year. Kabbalah and Chassidism teach that even after a person’s passing, the soul continues to grow and progress each year, so the birthday still holds meaning. If that is true of every Jew, how much more so for a righteous person, a Rebbe, whose influence continues to grow from year to year.

The Rebbe's secret was his endearment. He "called" to the Jewish people through the shluchim he sent throughout the world, and this story from Alaska is a wonderful example. It took many years before the Rebbe sent a permanent emissary to Anchorage, but Yisro waited patiently for 20 years and lived a full Jewish life.

The week of the Rebbe's birthday is a good time to recommit ourselves to calling out with love to the entire Jewish people. Because, in the end, love wins.