The Dokshitzer Niggun

How did a girl in Camp Ramah learn a niggun from Dokshitz?

The Niggun Encounter

(The following story appeared in Ami-Living Magazine, 25 Elul 5782)

In the early 1970's Rabbi Itche Meyer Lipszyc, shliach in Oak Park, Michigan, drove to the bustling university city of Ann Arbor three times a week to give classes and meet Jewish students. One particular day, he heard someone call, "Hey, Rabbi! Wanna sing a chasidic niggun for us?" It was a young college student, sitting on the stoop of a small home with five of his friends.

Rabbi Lipszyc stopped and parked the car. "Of course, I'm happy to," he said. "But do you think I can make the song just flow out on command? If you want to have a proper farbrengen — that's where we sing the chasidic songs — we need to create the right environment with a l'chaim."

He looked around at the college students, already knowing the answer. "Do any of you have some whiskey or liquor?"

"Does tequila work?" asked one of the boys after introducing himself as Neil Cooper.

"What's tequila?" the Rabbi wondered. "Is it alcoholic?"

Neil laughed and nodded.

He followed the group of students into the house, where they settled in around the kitchen table. Neil brought up the topic of the niggun again. “Can you sing one?” he asked the shliach.

The rabbi shook his head. “Not yet, not yet.” He explained the concept of a farbrengen, saying that it needed three core elements: a l’chaim, conversation that pushed people to better themselves, and lastly, the niggunim.

After an hour of intense conversation, Rabbi Lipszyc began to sing the Dokshitzer niggun. By the end of it, the students were clapping, banging, and dancing around the table.

“Can you teach us another?” one student asked.

Rabbi Lipszyc looked at his watch. It was getting late, and he still had a 6 p.m. class to give.

“How about this?” he proposed to the students. “I’ll be back next week, and if you all know this niggun by heart, I’ll teach you another.”

The next week, the shliach was back.

When he stopped at the house, the students greeted him in song. “Okay, okay, you’ve earned another niggun,” he told them and sat down to teach one more.

For a few weeks, the shliach and the students continued to meet. When midterms came around, they paused the weekly farbrengen. Unfortunately, it never got started again.

Camp Ramah?

Years later, Rabbi Lipszyc was in the home of a community member, Ted Scholnik, when Ted asked him, “Can you sing a niggun?”

The request echoed one he had received years earlier. As he’d done in

the house on campus back then, he began to sing the lively Dokshitzer Niggun. He was only a few seconds in when a small voice joined him. It was Ted's little daughter, Abby, who seemed to know this rare tune — perfectly.

When the shliach finished singing and the last claps had died down, Abby asked, "Hey, Rabbi, how do you know that song?"

He laughed. "I was about to ask you the same thing!" "Oh, I learned it in Camp Ramah," she replied, referring to a large Conservative camp in Canada.

Apparently, one Shabbos afternoon, one of the counselors had an idea — he knew a really fun chasidic song and taught the niggun, line by line, until all of the hundreds of campers were singing along.

"Do you know his name?" the Rabbi asked aloud.

Abby thought for a moment, trying to remember. "Neil Cooper, I think. Do you know him?"

After repeating the story for a few decades, Mrs. Lipszyc said to her husband one day, "We need to track Neil down." It was more than 40 years since he had first taught Neil the niggun. "Of course I remember!" Neil said when the rabbi finally tracked him down online and sent him a cryptic email.

"If this is the rabbi who taught me a chasidic niggun when I was a student at U of M, I well remember both the niggun and the baal menagein who taught it to me. I also remember some other things about that year, including your late-night visits and our discussions about Judaism."

Neil invited the shliach and his wife to come meet him in person. On Thursday, August 24, 2017, Rabbi and Mrs. Lipszyc went to visit Neil in his office at a large Conservative synagogue in Wynnewood,

Pennsylvania. Neil was now the leader of a vibrant community with 700 Jewish families.

He took the shluchim on a tour of the mikvah, which was built according to stringent halachic standards. He also told them about his Hava Nagrilla kosher barbecue competition that week, where all the keilim were new and every food product was kosher. He showed them the wing of his synagogue that he had turned into a Jewish day school. Taharas hamishpachah, kashrus, chinuch — Neil, who had come a long way from when he had been a college student with only scattered knowledge of his heritage, was now leading his congregation towards keeping more halachos.

After their trek around the building, Neil stood in front of his impressive structure and motioned to it. “Rabbi Lipszyc, this is all because of you.”

The Joy of Sukkos

We are in the middle of celebrating the holiday of Sukkot, which is characterized by the mitzvah to be joyous. In truth, every holiday includes a commandment to be joyful, but if you pay attention to the words of the Torah, you’ll notice that Passover has no *clear* commandment to be joyful, and it is mentioned regarding Shavuot only once. On the other hand, three distinct mentions of joy are in the Torah with regard to Sukkot.

Why the distinction? Shouldn’t we celebrate all holidays with joy?

The Rebbe once cited a Midrashic teaching, which points out that the three festivals correspond to the agricultural cycle of the year. Passover is always in the spring, during the barley harvest. It’s at a point in the year when the farmer is worried — there’s no telling how the harvest season will go. Therefore, joy is not explicitly mentioned in the Torah.

Shavuot is during the wheat harvest. At this point, the harvest season is already at its height, and the farmer could rest assured that it is going well. Therefore, we are commanded to be joyous — if only once.

But Sukkot is a whole different story; at that point, all the harvest has been collected and stored away. Now, the joy is complete.

This seems to be a good explanation for an agrarian society. But what is the spiritual message that could be relevant to a Jew in 2022?

The Rebbe explained that these three levels of joy come from a much deeper place.

Passover represents the beginning of a Jew's spiritual journey. The Exodus from Egypt is the birth of the Jewish Nation — and at that point, one could not be sure that the Jewish people would live up to the expectations, and be deserving of receiving the Torah and becoming the chosen people. Therefore, joy would be premature.

Shavuot is when we received the Torah, after declaring that "we will do and we will listen." At that point, we passed the first test — we committed to observe the Torah. Therefore, there was already reason for optimism, and the Torah mentions joy one time.

Still, it hadn't passed the test of time. We didn't yet have the opportunity to live our daily lives according to Torah and mitzvot and prove that we could live up to our commitment.

Indeed, 40 days later the Jewish people committed the sin of the golden calf. It was a terrible occurrence — but there was a silver lining: G-d gave us the concept of repentance. On Yom Kippur, when G-d told Moses that he forgave the Jewish people and accepted their repentance, it demonstrated the extent that the Jewish people could be relied upon. Even those who fell to the depths of committing the sin of the golden calf — when faced with their deeds, they

immediately repented. That was a cause for great celebration. *(Toras Menachem Vol 27, P 36)*

When those students learned the niggun, it was just another day in the life of the Shliach. He couldn’t have known the impact that the short meeting would ultimately have. But decades later, he learned the power of a single interaction — a niggun’s impact is eternal.