

# There is No Gate that Can't Be Opened

Category: Holidays, Rosh Hashana

*When the Rebbe and his secretary were almost stranded at the Ohel for a full Shabbos.*

## Visiting the Ohel

A few weeks ago, I traveled with a group from our community to visit the Rebbe's Ohel in New York.

—A short digression: People occasionally ask me why Jews visit gravesites of righteous people? Leaving the lengthy discussion aside, I often say that we learned this behavior from the Rebbe himself.

The Rebbe is interred right next to his father-in-law, the previous Rebbe, and it was a site he visited very often. In the years after his father-in-law's passing, he would visit regularly twice a month, and over the ensuing decades, those trips became more frequent. In one particular year when I had the privilege of studying at 770, in 5750 (1989-90), the Rebbe made no less than 120 trips to the Ohel!

Every time he visited, he brought along a large paper bag with the prayer-requests he received from around the world. The Rebbe would read these letters at the gravesite, pray for the individuals mentioned, and then tear up the letters and leave them there. He would stand there for hours each time, typically arriving in the early afternoon and returning at sunset. I remember one occasion he arrived back almost at midnight.

In truth, this tradition of praying at the graves of righteous individuals and requesting their intercession has existed among the Jewish people since Biblical times. When Moses sent the spies to scout the land of Canaan, one of the spies—Caleb—went to pray at the graves of the patriarchs when he realized that his colleagues had nefarious plans. He said to them, “My forefathers, pray for mercy for me.” So, it really goes back to the dawn of Jewish history.—

We started our day with shacharis near the Ohel, and afterwards, each of us wrote a note with our personal requests. It was interesting to see how serious that moment was. After all, writing this note is a very introspective moment; it makes each person think about what is most important to him. Afterward, we entered the Ohel together.

## **Avraham's Restaurant**

Following that, we made our way to 770 Eastern Parkway, the Chabad World Headquarters. It was a unique opportunity to visit the Rebbe's room; this was the place where countless sought his guidance, and which, for half a century, from his arrival in the United States in 1941 until 1994, served as the center of his activities.

The person responsible for the Rebbe's room is Rabbi Chaim Boruch Halberstam. Before allowing us into the Rebbe's room, Rabbi Halberstam shared an interesting anecdote about his own experience with the Rebbe.

Rabbi Halberstam grew up in a Chassidic family in Israel, as a descendant of the illustrious Sanz Chassidic dynasty. As a teenager, he became interested in Chabad and eventually visited the Rebbe. He ended up remaining in New York, near the Rebbe, and later on, he opened a restaurant named "Ess Un Bentch" near 770.

When Rabbi Halberstam's father visited him, he was surprised and concerned to find out that his son, a descendant of respected rabbis and holy men, was running a restaurant. He told his son that it might be more appropriate for him to be a rabbi or a teacher in a yeshiva, something spiritually oriented, rather than working in a restaurant. But his son argued back that this was his chosen path and he was happy with it.

During this visit, Rabbi Halberstam's father had a private audience with the Rebbe. He mentioned his concern about his son's involvement in the restaurant business, which didn't fit with the esteemed reputation of the Halberstam family, who were descendants of their lofty grandfather, Rabbi Chaim of Sanz.

Hearing his concerns, the Rebbe responded, "But the grandfather had a restaurant too!"

Rabbi Halberstam's father couldn't recall any grandfather who had a restaurant—certainly not Rabbi Chaim of Sanz—and he asked which grandfather the Rebbe meant. The Rebbe replied, "Our grandfather, Avraham Avinu, also dealt with hosting guests." Avraham Avinu set up a tent open on all four sides, and anyone was invited to enter and eat there.

Rabbi Halberstam's father argued that Abraham did it for spiritual reasons, to spread the word of G-d, whereas his son was doing it primarily for his livelihood. But the Rebbe replied that it wasn't so simple. When guests at Abraham's tent asked about the cost of the meal, Abraham would introduce them to the Creator and invite them to acknowledge Him. If they did, they could leave in peace, but if they refused, Abraham charged them the full price. So, in a way, even Abraham earned a living from his tent.

Hearing this, Rabbi Halberstam's father accepted his son's choice.

## **Getting the Rebbe Home for Shabbos**

Later in the day, our group had the chance to meet with the Rebbe's secretary, Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky. Among the stories he shared was a remarkable one from an unforgettable Friday afternoon.

In 5726-1965, the first Yahrzeit of the Rebbe's mother fell out on Shabbos. On that Friday, Rabbi Krinsky drove the Rebbe to the Ohel—as he had the privilege to do some one thousand and five hundred times over the course of forty years. Usually, the Rebbe would ask Rabbi Krinsky to inform him when a certain hour approached, but on this particular Friday, the Rebbe made no such comment.

The hours began to pass and Shabbos was approaching, but Rabbi Krinsky didn't want to disturb the Rebbe, so he waited in the hope that the Rebbe would finish and exit on his own. But time passed, and there was no sign that Rebbe was planning to leave. Finally, Rabbi Krinsky approached the Rebbe.

The Rebbe quickly gathered the letters and left the Ohel, and Rabbi Krinsky drove towards the cemetery's exit. However, to his dismay, they found the gate locked. It was already after 5:00PM, and the guard had locked the gate without regard for anyone left inside...

In 1965, car phones didn't exist; Rabbi Krinsky climbed the gate and jumped over it, ran to a nearby store, and called the police on the public phone, telling them that the Rebbe was waiting, and he needed to get to Brooklyn before Shabbos. The police, however, responded that they couldn't assist.

Rabbi Krinsky returned to the car, drove to the cemetery's second gate, but found it locked as well. Desperate, he headed back to the main gate, but the guard was nowhere to be found, and the police had not arrived.

Time was running out. The Rebbe was stuck inside the cemetery, 40 minutes before Shabbos, with no siddur, no tallis, no food for Shabbos—nothing. It was his mother's first yahrzeit, and there was no minyan. Not to mention the hundreds of chassidim who had arrived that week for the anticipated farbrengen. He needed to get the Rebbe back to 770, and it needed to happen before Shabbos.

It suddenly occurred to him that he might be able to remove the gate from its hinges. With a wrench intended for changing tires, he raced to loosen the bolts and managed to bring down the entire gate.

The gate was very heavy. He began dragging it out of the way, when to his surprise, he realized that the Rebbe was right there, helping him drag it (until that point, the Rebbe had been calmly working on the letters, giving off no sign of stress). They both got back into the car, and just as they drove off, the police arrived. Disregarding them, Rabbi Krinsky sped off towards 770, disregarding traffic lights and even occasionally driving in the wrong direction on a street. What should have taken 35 minutes, he accomplished in a quarter of an hour.

They arrived mere minutes before the onset of Shabbos. Rabbi Krinsky concluded that 57 years later, he still feels the stress of those moments.

## **Tashlich**

Today, we are going to recite the Tashlich prayer. I'd like to share one final story about a Rosh Hashanah incident that took place in 1956.

Every year, the Rebbe would lead a lively procession of Chassidim to the Brooklyn Botanical Garden for Tashlich. That year, there was a terrible rainstorm, so the streets were mostly empty, and when they got to the park, they realized that the

gate was locked. The guard thought nobody would come due to the rain.

But the Rebbe didn't turn around. He sized up the gate in front of him, and suddenly began scaling it, reaching the other side in no time. When the Chassidim saw the Rebbe do it, they immediately followed—old and young alike—and everyone got into the park to recite Tashlich.

The Rebbe often quoted a saying from the Rebbe Maharash: "People say that when you face an obstacle, try to go under it. If you can't, try to go over it. But I say, *lechatchila ariber*, go over it from the outset." The Rebbe was a living example of this; he taught us not to be afraid of any obstacle; there is no barrier, no challenge too big to overcome.

So, as we stand here about to hear the Shofar, which we hope will open the gates of Heaven for G-d to accept our prayer, remember that the Rebbe taught us—there's no gate that can't be opened.