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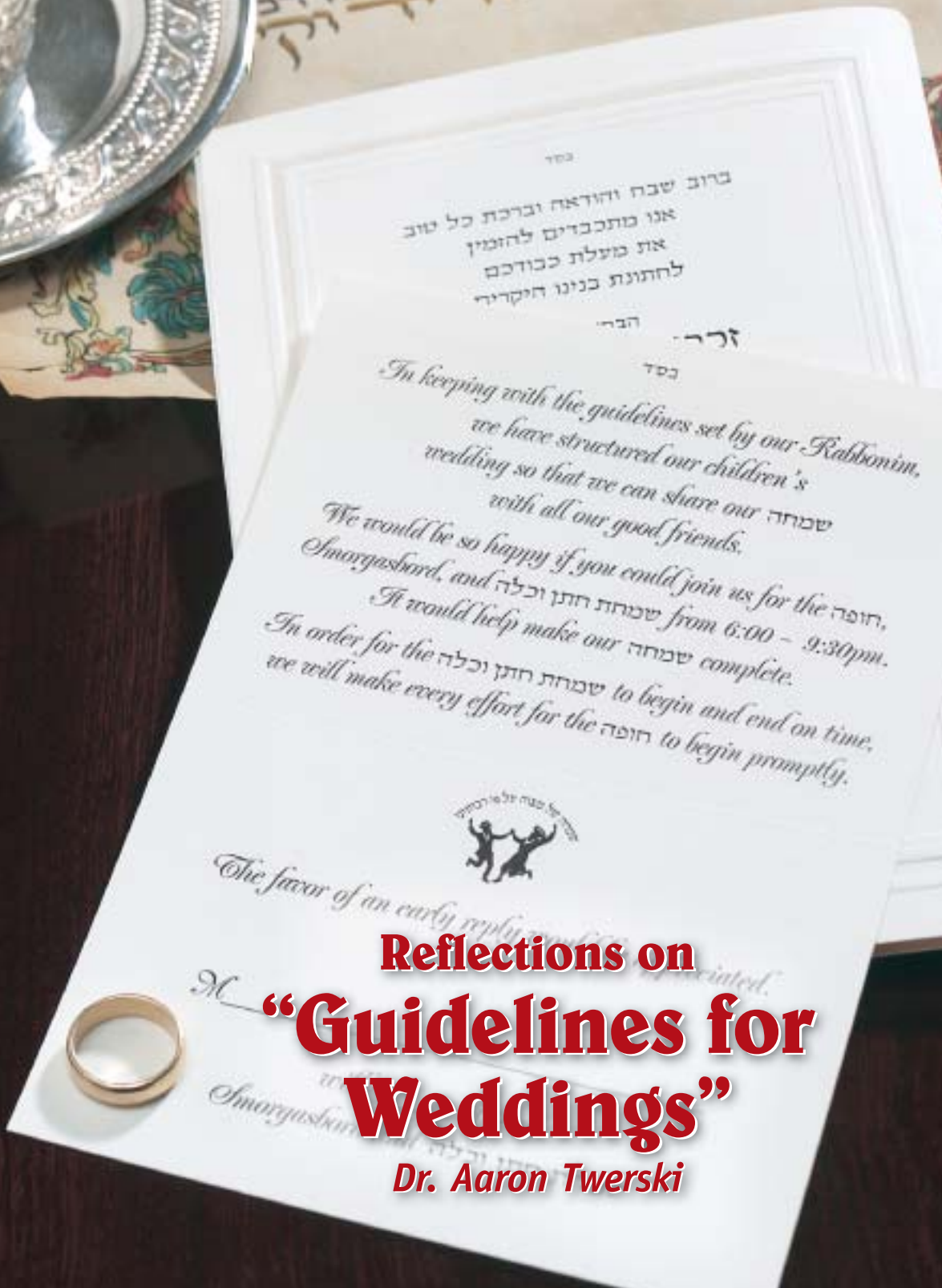
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Sugar Cubes
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*The Road to
Happily Ever After:
Revisited*

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Reflections on "Guidelines for Weddings"

Dr. Aaron Twerski

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TERRORISM, SUGAR CUBES & FILET MIGNON

IT'S ABOUT ATTITUDE

Permit me to explain the ambiguous title of this article. It is not about terrorism per se, nor even about the various foods groups; rather it's about attitude.

While the news for close to two years now has been painful and frightening at best, and arousing feelings of total helplessness at worst, the question we all need to ask ourselves is, how has the situation changed our lives, and more importantly, ourselves? To be sure, we follow the news, and we respond by lobbying, writing letters to our congressman, e-mailing our objections to the media for their biased coverage, and raising money for important causes that may be suffering, or whose needs are increasing; we are making a difference out there – with others. *But what about ourselves?*

If any of us are the same people as we were prior to September 2000, then we really need to engage in some deep soul searching.

I remember another painful time years ago (there have been so many), when Shimon Peres was Prime Minister and there were several consecutive days of bus bombings on the Jerusalem bus #18, which runs from Bayit Vegan

to the center of town. There were so many tragic losses of lives of Jewish men, women and children, that it completely shook even the seasoned veteran residents of Yerushalayim to the core.

During that painful week, my wife and I were invited to a wedding of a child of one of her oldest and dearest friends. This is one of those occasions where one's *kesuba* obligates the spouse to tag along to a wedding where he won't even know one person (besides his wife). With the terrible tragedies taking place then in *Eretz Yisroel*, who had the desire or frame of mind to attend any *simcha*, let alone that of strangers? But duty called.

As I later made my way to the dining room, I decided to make the most of the situation at hand. I had been called the day before by an organization in Flatbush that sponsors timely *shiurim* to the general public, and was asked if I would give a lecture the following Sunday with *divrei chizuk* (words of encouragement) for the depressing situation in *Eretz Yisroel*. I readily agreed, and promised to call back with an appropriate title for the *shiur*. Seated at a table of strangers, I would use the time to gather my thoughts in preparation for the lecture that coming Sunday.

I found my seat just as the main course of filet mignon was being brought to the table. Someone asked if anyone had heard the latest news from Yerushalayim, as there had been another

bombing of a #18 bus that very afternoon. Another responded, "I heard 22 people died today!" Another who had just begun his main course interjected, "No, I heard it was 23 dead." And then in the very same breath added, "Wow, the filet mignon is delicious!"

As I sat there listening, I realized that I had found a title for Sunday's lecture: "Bus #18 and Filet Mignon." I meant no criticism against anyone. The point of my lecture was how we are *all*, in a sense, that way. We hear about tragedies on the radio, pick it up from CNN, and read all the details in the newspaper. Then we sit down and truly enjoy our dinner of filet mignon, without missing a beat. How many of us see ourselves in this scenario?

LARGE UNDERTAKINGS AND SMALL HABITS

At that lecture, I shared a lifelong lesson that I had learned years earlier from a great man on just this point. I was returning from a several-month stay in *Eretz Yisroel*, and to my great fortune, on the flight to New York I recognized the Lakewood *Rosh HaYeshiva*, Rabbi Shneur Kotler, זצ"ל. Being young and brash, I wormed my way into sitting in the very next seat, to learn whatever I could from this outstanding Torah leader.

I asked him to share some personal recollections of his late father, Rabbi

Rabbi Ginzberg, founding *Rav* of the Ohr Moshe Torah Institute in Hillcrest, NY, is currently *Rav* of the Chofetz Chaim Torah Center of Cedarhurst (Long Island), New York.

Aharon Kotler, זצ"ל and his effort on behalf of the Vaad Hatzolah during World War II. I remember his warm smile at the question, and then he responded, "My father the *Rosh HaYeshiva* זצ"ל accomplished great things; but if you want to know about true sacrifices, let me tell you about my mother ז"ל."

I had read so much of Reb Aharon's great *mesiras nefesh* during this period, yet I never heard anything about the *Rebbitzin's* sacrifice. Reb Shneur זצ"ל explained: "My mother had a sweet tooth, and she loved to have a sugar cube in her mouth when drinking a tea. From the time the war began until the end, she never took a sugar cube into her mouth. What a total and complete self-sacrifice for *Klal Yisroel!*"

At first, I thought Reb Shneur זצ"ל was toying with me. After all, Reb Aharon, was involved in saving hundreds of lives. He dedicated himself tirelessly to raising funds for Hatzolah and lobbying in Washington over the years. How could he compare these Herculean efforts and heroic feats with the *Rebbitzin* ז"ל, who simply refrained from having her sugar cubes during the war?

But then I understood the late Lakewood *Rosh HaYeshiva's* insight. Sometimes it's easier to focus one's attention on a cause and on a life mission than to change even one small habit – even refraining from adding a sugar cube to one's tea. The late *Rebbitzin* Kotler, while not having access to the movers and shakers of the Washington political establishment, was shaken to the root of her soul, "How can I enjoy my sweet tea when my brothers and sisters in Europe are suffering unspeakable horrors?"

ACTIVISM...AND MAKING CHANGES

Many of us have on occasion participated in rallies (some even rallying against those who did not participate). Some of us have joined public *Tehillim* gatherings, while others may have joined missions to *Eretz Yisroel*. And while these are extremely important (and we should continue to be actively involved where

feasible), has it changed us or our lifestyles in any shape or form?

At a wedding that I attended several weeks ago, I saw something for the first time. At each table at the dinner, in place of *benchers* there were ArtScroll *Tehillims* with a brief note on the inside flap. It read: "The *chassan* and *kalla*, at this time of great joy, are also pained at the suffering in *Eretz Yisroel*. As a special request to their guests, during the first half hour or so [when several hundred people are held hostage to the



As Reb Isser Zalman had begun to escort his grandson who was embarking on this joyous reunion, he began to think of all his grandson's friends who will never make such a trip – his friends who will never walk down an aisle to a *chupa*.



whims and designs of the photographer shooting hundreds of pictures – A.Z.G.] all are asked to use this precious time to say to themselves several chapters of *Tehillim* for our brothers in *Eretz Yisroel*."

This novel idea did not go over too well at the table where I was seated. A lively debate ensued about whether this was an appropriate setting for such a message. While I leave that decision for others to make, the subtle message that things cannot be normal, even at weddings, was an important one.

While others may not have chosen to put *Tehillim* on the tables, they instead

chose to cut down on the excesses that we have grown accustomed to at *simchos* of late. One wedding had a sign prominently displayed at the reception entrance, that due to the tragedies in *Eretz Yisroel*, there will be no Viennese table, and instead the monies saved will be sent to besieged families.

A prominent *Rosh Yeshiva* confided to me recently that while he was withholding judgment on how effective the recently conceived *simcha* guidelines will prove to be, one thing is undeniable: the need to tone down our *simchos* due to the situation in *Eretz Yisroel* is crucial.

IN REMEMBRANCE OF THOSE NOT HERE

During the very same plane-ride with Rabbi Shneur Kotler that I mentioned, the *Rosh HaYeshiva* told me of an episode involving his saintly grandfather, Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer זצ"ל. The incident provides yet another example of how one can take steps beyond natural, emotional response to remind oneself of other's suffering. Before World War II, Reb Shneur was engaged to be married. When the war broke out, he escaped to *Eretz Yisroel* (while his father came to America). He spent the war years together with his grandfather, all the while not knowing if his *kalla* had survived the terrible destruction of European Jewry.

After the war, word came that she had survived, and Reb Shneur was preparing to travel to meet her and finally marry her. It was a festive time in the Meltzer home. As Reb Shneur was about to take leave for his wedding trip, his grandfather, Reb Isser Zalman, took hold of his arm to escort him to the waiting taxi. He began to descend the steps alongside his beloved grandson and then stopped, and told Reb Shneur to continue on his own.

Those present assumed that it was too emotional for him to escort him all the way, but he later explained his reason for stopping. As he had begun to escort his grandson who was embarking on this joyous reunion, he began to think of all

his grandson's friends who will never make such a trip – his friends who will never walk down an aisle to a *chupa*, or be reunited with a *kalla* or a wife. To identify with them – with their great loss – he held himself back from the full expression of joy that a grandfather naturally has for a beloved grandson.

What an important lesson for us: Even when one feels inspired to celebrate a joyous occasion, one should stop and consider the less fortunate. Stop and reduce your expression of joy in consideration of their suffering.

AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD?

Several months ago, I attended a *Sheva Berachos* for the daughter of a prominent community leader in the New York area. An incident there brought home the message that one doesn't have to be Reb Isser Zalman, or Reb Shneur Kotler, to manifest what should be a natural expression of sharing in the suffering of others in some tangible way.

Seated around the large table was a virtual "Who's Who" of the greater

New York community, except for one individual who seemed out of place – a kind, decent person, but not someone whom I had seen involved in community affairs like the others. As everyone was enjoying the dinner and the light conversation, I walked an individual who took the remaining empty seat at the table. After perfunctory greetings, he explained the reason for his tardiness. It seems that just several hours earlier a terrible tragedy had happened in a suburban community. A six-year-old boy being dropped off in front of his home by the school bus, somehow got trapped under the bus. The driver unwittingly pulled away, tragically killing the child. All this took place in full view of his mother (may *Hashem* comfort her). This person explained that this was a relative of his in-laws, and he therefore attended the hastily arranged *levaya*, and consequently had to arrive late to this *simcha*.

Everyone at the table groaned and commented on how terrible this tragedy was for the family of this young boy. Several minutes later, the man sitting next to me (the very person whom I had deemed out of place at a table reserved for prominent community leaders) pushed away his dinner plate. I politely asked him if he was feeling well, and his response opened my eyes to what a Jew is supposed to be like. He said, "We just heard about this tragic accident, and I'm thinking about what his mother and father must be going through at this moment. How can I sit here and enjoy a meal, when *Yidden* are going through such suffering!"

After digesting his heartfelt words, I too pushed away my plate and thought of the following *Chazal*.

The Talmud tells about a young man who was deathly ill and then recovered. His father asked him, "What did you see in the next world (as he was so close to death's door)?"

He responded, "I saw an upside-down world, where the leaders at the top in this world are on the bottom in the next world."

His father responded, "No, my son.

**Alas! A terrible story is unfolding before our very eyes!
We dare not be oblivious to it.**

A little boy has Lukemia!



This past August, a six-year-old little boy was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Lukemia. **He is undergoing intense treatment at Schneider Children's Medical Center.**

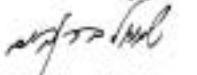
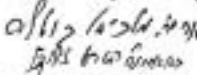


The father, a cherished Yeshiva Rebbe was forced to give up his job. The medical costs involved are astronomic. **The family finds itself in a dangerous & precarious situation!**

Their financial situation is unbearable and is reaching critical proportions! **They must be helped immediately!**

Act today before it is too late!

May you and your loved ones enjoy only good health and Simcha in your own family always.

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The world you witnessed is the true one.”

Moments earlier I had just wondered about this individual – why was he sitting together with prominent community leaders – only to now feel just the opposite: Why are these people sitting at a table with a true *ohev Yisroel* like him?

The *Chofetz Chaim* זצ"ל was well into his eighties when his wife woke up in the middle of the night and noticed that her saintly husband was not in his bed. She rose quickly to see if he was feeling well, and found him lying on the cold, hard floor, with his hands bent under his head in place of a pillow. Seeing her elderly husband in such a position frightened her, so he explained his actions: “I was lying so comfortably in my warm bed, and then I began to think of all my fellow Jews who have been forced from their homes by the advancing armies and have no warm bed to sleep in. How can I sleep in my bed while others sleep on the cold, hard floors? I too will do the same. So I arose and lay on the floor, as well.”

While we are not on the *Chofetz Chaim's* level of *Ahavas Yisroel*, there should be some tangible way to cut back on some item of comfort, and say to the Almighty the words of the Shunemite woman to Elisha: “*Besoch ami anochi yosheves* – I choose to sit amongst my people” and to feel their pain along with them (*Melachim II* 4,13).

ON AN ELEMENTARY LEVEL

A principal of one of the local elementary schools spoke about this theme at a recent assembly of the junior high school grades and then asked what each boy might be willing to sacrifice in his association with *Acheinu Bnei Yisroel*. He was both surprised and touched by the various suggestions offered by the young boys. Some were prepared to give up certain snacks, others their recess time, and others even their favorite toys. What was amazing, though, is that each and every child was fully prepared to give up something.

Contrast this with the response to

the very same question that I proposed in a lecture that I gave to women at a *shul*. When asked what they were prepared to give up, most responded that they would have to think very carefully of what they could honestly do without. Why were the children more ready to sacrifice than their parents? This is a question that is worth looking into a little deeper.

If we can't give up the filet mignon, nor the comfortable bed, and maybe not even the sugar cube, what is there left for us to do?

Maybe there is one thing left. Volumes are yet to be written about the life and accomplishments of the late leader of Torah Jewry in this past century, the *Ponovezher Rosh HaYeshiva*, Rabbi Elazar Menachem Shach זצ"ל, who passed away several months ago. Hundreds of stories and anecdotes have been told over at the many *hespedim*. One in particular comes to mind in this discussion.

It is well known that Rabbi Shach

kept completely out of public view the last four or five years due to his advanced age and weak condition. What is not that well known was the message at his very last public meeting with the Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Yisroel Meir Lau. He said to Rabbi Lau, “I am more than 100 years old and I have no strength left. I hear that they sell *chazir* (pork) in the streets of Tel Aviv, and that there is *chillul Shabbos* in Ashkelon. There is nothing left for me to do about it. Except one thing...I can cry.”

With that, Rabbi Shach began to cry, with his entire body shaking uncontrollably for what seemed like an eternity; until he fell into an exhausted sleep.

Maybe we need our sugar cubes, and maybe we need our warm beds, but at least we can still do one thing to share in the pain of our brothers and sisters in *Eretz Yisroel*. We can cry. Cry for them and cry with them. And if we are unable to do even that, then we should cry anyway. We should cry for ourselves. ■

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Reflections on “GUIDELINES FOR WEDDINGS”



OF DIFFERENCES AND UNANIMITY

Several months ago, after many years of agonizing over the escalating lavishness of our *simcha* celebrations, *gedolei Yisroel* placed their imprimatur on a set of *hanhagos* (guidelines for general practice) to govern weddings in the *chareidi* community. The promulgation of those guidelines engendered a plethora of reactions. Some welcomed them with enthusiasm, others with equanimity, and still others with derision.

The truth be told, even among members of the Torah leadership, not all were in total agreement with the *hanhagos*. While some *rabbanim* and *roshei yeshiva* withheld their signatures from the guidelines simply because of their general policy of not signing their names to public pronouncements, others were motivated by more substantive concerns. Several viewed the guidelines as too tepid, others viewed them

Dr. Twerski, a member of the Editorial Board of *The Jewish Observer*, is a professor in Brooklyn Law School and serves as chairman of the board of Agudath Israel of America's Commission on Legislation and Civic Action.

as too detailed, and yet others feared that the time was not ripe for their broad promulgation.

This much, however, is undisputed. Over the many years that *takanos* have been under discussion, there has been unanimity among all *gedolei Yisroel* that our lifestyles have taken on a decidedly hedonistic and non-Jewish character, and that serious examination is in order. There has been no disagreement among the *gedolim* that we need to downsize. The question has not been *whether*, but rather *how* to accomplish this goal. Let those cynics who point to

the absence of one or another name on the list of rabbinic endorsements on the *hanhagos* point to even one who believes that the extravagance which has become so commonplace meets with his approval. They will search in vain. Those who continue their excesses of the past can find no support from any Torah authority other than in the lamentation of *Moshe Rabbeinu* when he proclaimed: “*Vayishman Yeshurun vayivat* – and *Jeshurun* got fat and kicked” (*Devarim* 32,15).

HISTORY OF TAKANOS

Much has been written about the history of *takanos* in the pages of this publication.¹ All *bnei Torah* know them well. From the *takana* of Rabbi Gamliel prescribing stringent limitations on the costs of the burial of the dead; to the requirement that all

¹ “Community Controls on Extravagance: Is It Time to Revive Them?,” Lewis Brenner, June '71; “Notes on a Jewish Wedding,” by Avi, June '82; “The Time for *Tikkun* Has Arrived. Are We Ready?,” by Aaron Twerski, Feb '96; “Reflections on ‘Time for *Tikkun*’ One Year Later,” by Aaron Twerski, Jan '97; “Responding to the Message of Recent Events,” Rabbi Yaakov Perlow, Oct. '01.

maidens who had reached the age of *shidduchim* and went out to be seen by their prospective mates on *Chamisha Asar B'Av* would be dressed in borrowed clothes, so as not to shame those who were impoverished; to the strict guidelines set by the *Va'ad L'Arba Aratzos* to govern all *simchos*, there has been a long tradition of community standards set by *gedolei Yisroel* to govern various aspects of events in the Jewish life-cycle. These are not new innovations created by zealots in 5762, but historic benchmarks in enforcing restraints when deemed necessary.

WHY GUIDELINES FOR SIMCHOS

Gedolei Yisroel throughout the ages have written volumes about the incompatibility of extravagance and hedonism with fundamental Jewish values. And many of the *rabbanim* who spoke so eloquently in support of the guidelines have emphasized the need for modesty as a singular virtue. If so, then, why not an outright

attack on all aspects of conspicuous consumption? Why not guidelines on elaborate houses, cars, summer villas and posh vacations? And why guidelines for weddings? What about *bar mitzvas* and *seudos bris mila*?

First, let it be noted that *sifrei musar* and *chassidus* brim over the top with admonitions against all forms of indulgence in luxurious living. Those who wallow in materialism cannot aspire to or attain spiritual greatness. If the *chasuna hanhagos* are the first shot out of the cannon declaring an offensive on the part of *gedolei Yisroel* seeking to make a statement on one aspect of overindulgence, then it is a welcome start on a topic that will yet need to be addressed in further stages.

There is, however, a justification as to why *simchos* were chosen for *takanos* that is, in my opinion, irrefutable. There is good reason that Rabbi Gamliel made *takanos* for funerals, and that *gedolei Yisroel* throughout the ages set firm guidelines for *simchos*. For the most part, a Jew lives his life in private. What

one eats for dinner, the cost of one's furniture, whether one takes a car service or the subway to work – these are not public affairs.

There are, however, events in the life cycle of the Jew that are not and cannot be private. Burial of the dead is not a private affair; *levoyas hames* is a public *mitzva*. One cannot conduct a private funeral without transgressing the *mitzva* of *kavod hames* – giving due honor to the dead. When Rabbi Gamliel saw that the impoverished had to abandon their dead because they could not bury them with the standard honors expected at the time, he mandated a single uniform funeral service for all.

Weddings are not and cannot be private affairs. The *mitzva* of *simchas chasnan v'kalla* forces one out of the private domain into the public arena. Once a standard is set by community custom, all conform to it or else risk being shunned. It is no answer to tell the less fortunate to make a third-rate wedding. One can no more celebrate a third-rate wedding than one could make a third-

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rate funeral. Marie Antoinette's injunction to the poor, "Let them eat cake," rings very hollow indeed. Rabbi Gamliel understood that when the *halacha* forces the Jew into the public domain, *chachmei Yisroel* must mandate some sense of equality so that one need not wear the badge of poverty. Very simply, there are times when one must act not as individuals, but as part of a *klal*.

In a moving address, the Novominsker *Rebbe* שליט"א related that he had been questioned by a person of considerable means as to why he should not

be able to spend his money as he saw fit. The *Rebbe* answered him, "You are not only an individual, you are part of a *tzibbur*. The way in which you behave profoundly affects others who are less fortunate."

ONLY WEDDINGS?

Should there, then, not be guidelines for *bar mitzva* and *seudos bris mila*? The answer is: Of course there should be. The Vaad L'Arba Aratzos included all such public events. Talk to

parents who are forced to "shortchange" their 13-year-old whose classmates all have a three-day-weekend *bar mitzva* gala, or high-priced affairs in luxurious halls for several hundred couples. Contemplate the pain and shame of a youngster who feels left out because all his classmates within a period of several months have had posh celebrations and he is the class "neb." One strives that a *simcha* be full and complete – we wish our friends "*gantzeh simchos*." How complete can your *simcha* be if you know that it is driving a stake into the hearts of your children's friends? And for those who feel that they cannot impose the dishonor on their children and themselves, comes the crushing cost of tens of thousands of dollars that drives them into hapless debt. The smile you see on a host's face at such a *simcha* masks the long-term pain that accompanies it.

Yes, *bar mitzva* guidelines are in order, and hopefully they will come in time. There is, however, good reason to start with weddings.

Weddings – like funerals – come at a time of overwhelming emotional stress, and the principals (the celebrants and the mourners) do not usually respond in a calculated manner. Moreover, the details of the event are often orchestrated by an imperious outsider – the caterer in one case, the funeral director in the other – at previously established arbitrary costs. These outsiders are the ones who established the norm, and as time goes on, they continue to conform to the norm, or escalate it. Only organized communal pressure can redefine that norm, and scale things down. So we focus on weddings.

THE STARTING POINT

There is yet another factor in the way we celebrate our weddings that forces us to begin here. The secular culture has had its impact on our view of marriage and our way of celebrating the event. The wedding has taken on the Hollywood "perfect day" mythology. The gown must be exquisite. The video and photography must be

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superb. Flowers must give their “Garden of Eden” effect. The tiny tots must march to the *chupa* leaving a trail of flowers. The music must be heavenly. The smorgasbord and Viennese tables must provide enough food and delectables to feed two armies, and they must be artistic to boot. Everyone who attends the same *shul* and bungalow colony must be invited. The entire class of the *chassan* and *kalla* are must-invitees. And the list grows on. It is a train without brakes descending a mountain at 150 mph. It had to crash.

It has crashed.

So now we must take steps to disengage from this downward plunge and redesign our weddings. Interestingly, the starting point of these *hanhagos* is a celebration that is unanimously loathed, and yet most difficult to shake: the Vort. Yes, the couple has just become engaged, and they want the world to know it. But convening a large celebration, with lavish displays of refreshments, floral arrangements and music is a phenomenal waste of time and money, pulling the *chassan's* friends away from their sacred studies, playing havoc with the senior generation's *shiurim* and family time, and generally imposing on friends. An impromptu *L'chaim* for immediate family and intimate friends – in the *kalla's* home, if at all possible – makes so much sense; but even then one must battle convention and the couple's expectations to limit the scope of this event. It is, however, a battle worth waging.

Once this very first step in the guidelines is violated, the rest of the *hanhagos* will likely be ignored as a matter of course. We must stop and think: No one contests the superfluous nature of this gathering. All the more reason to comply with this aspect of the *hanhagos*, and begin the celebration on the right track.

THE EMBATTLED MIDDLE CLASS

The guidelines will not have a direct effect on those living at or below the poverty line. For reasons to be explained later, they would

be indirect beneficiaries. These *Yungeleit* do not have the option to make anything other than low-budget weddings. My discussions over the past years have been focused on our impoverished middle class who, although earning nicely by general American standards, are literally choking from their multifarious financial commitments. Families with (*b'li ayin hara*) five or more children cannot sustain themselves even on incomes of \$75 to \$125 thousand. Between tuition, camp, medical insurance, mortgage on house and car, they live on the edge. If every second or third year, they have to finance a “*baalabatisha chasuna*,” they are driven to – and often over – the brink of bankruptcy. The peer pressure to match up to expectations is enormous. They say (and I believe them) that without *takanos* they are lost.

Even the well-to-do, upper-middle class cannot afford the high cost of *simchos*.

And yet, because they are perceived

as well-to-do, the pressure on them to make a really elaborate wedding is very great. The only solution is to start at the top and introduce some limitations. The ripple effect will be enormous. It will redound to the benefit of everyone. The gaps between the various income strata will not disappear; but they will shrink dramatically. The savings have been calculated to be in the tens of millions of dollars each year. The savings in self-respect and peace of mind are incalculable.

ARE WE BEING CONSISTENT?

The wags and scoffers have already taken this first cheap shot. “Yes,” they say, “the *rabbanim* and *rebbe's* tell us to make modest weddings, but when they make a wedding they invite everyone.” One could well view a wedding made by a *rebbe* as an affair of state. *Chassidim* and *talmidim* attend because it is a communal religious event – not a private *simcha*. I have attended

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many such *simchos*. Most often they take place in the large *beis medrash* or a large hall.

Catering is done at bargain-rate prices. Serving is on plastic dishes. All who attend share in the cost because they wish to be part of an event that is a part of their own religious and spiritual experience. The cost per couple at these events is a fraction of the cost at a regular wedding. These are no-frill *simchos*.

That should trouble no one but the naysayers. All should understand that

kehilla events are of a different genre.

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Those who know them can attest to the pain that they endure when in attendance at these events.

For those who contemplate turning a blind eye toward the guidelines, I urge you to think again. For years, many *bnei Torah* have turned to their *roshei yeshiva* for direction. The *roshei yeshiva* were hesitant to act because they feared that they would be met with a helpless shrug or – worse – with cynicism. Well, now they have spoken. If we decide to reject their counsel, we shall be making a statement loud and clear that ultimately we are not subservient to Torah authority: *Let them stick to religion and let us run our lives as we see fit!* Torah will be placed *b'keren zavis* – in an obscure corner, causing the ultimate *chillul Hashem*.

When *Yitzchak Avninu* was placed on the *akeida*, he asked his father: “*Abba, kefos osi yaffeh she’lo evot* – Bind me tight so that I not kick and thus render my sacrifice invalid!”

Klal Yisroel has always understood that we need to be bound so that we not render our lives unworthy. We have always understood that restraint frees us to ascend to a more noble and lofty existence.

Some predict that nothing will come of the guidelines. I disagree. I have deep faith that the overwhelming majority of *Bnei Torah* will honor them in both letter and spirit.

They are not the be-all and end-all. But they reflect an important first step on a journey that is not yet fully charted. But if the route is not defined, the destination is clear: To lead our lives within the context of *הצנע לכת עם ה' אלוהינו* “Walking humbly with *Hashem* your G-d.” ■

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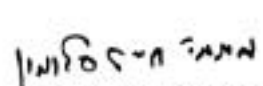
from an active, healthy woman she has been reduced to a pain-wracked, immobile patient. Her life is one hazy blur of agony.

...Grant Her the Means to Rise Again!!

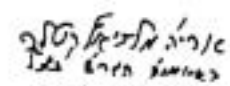
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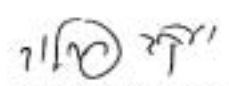




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The Valley of Dry Bones

Ger Then and Now

The great pre-World War II Jewish centers of Poland have occupied a hallowed place in my heart since my earliest childhood. First there were the early recollections of the stories which my grandparents shared with me. A bit later came the fascinating accounts of life in “der heim” that I heard from survivors in the beis midrash where I davened as I grew up. When I was older and entered yeshiva, my Rebbeim would constantly and reverently quote divrei Torah and mussar from the rabbinical giants who

had been nurtured in Europe’s Torah centers. Although Warsaw, Mir, Krakow and Radin were places where I had never set foot, I nevertheless felt an inextricable bond and connection with them.

When an opportunity to visit Poland presented itself, I seized it immediately. In the weeks prior to the trip, I felt a sense of nervous anticipation and excitement. More than once I caught myself dreaming about the cities and towns that I would soon visit.

WARSAW, IN ITS FRIGID WINTER

A driver was waiting for our group as we emerged from the customs area of Warsaw’s airport. Though he was obviously assimilated, he remained a proud Jew. He welcomed us into his 15-year old Mercedes, and sped towards our first stop - the town of Ger, just a few miles out of Warsaw.

As he drove us through the streets of Warsaw – a combination of drab, concrete Communist-era buildings, flanked by newer, cleaner, tastefully decorated post-Communist constructions – it was extremely difficult for me to imagine that this city had once been the very heart of Chassidic Poland. I stared into the eyes of the blank, emotionless, Slavic faces of the Poles walk-

Rabbi Birnbaum, an educator in Lakewood, NJ, and a regular columnist for *Hamodia*, is a frequent contributor to these pages.

Title Photo: Cemetery in Ger Poland as it looks today. The red brick building is the Ohel that houses the Kevarim of the Gerrer Rebbe, the Chiddushei Harim and the Sefas Emes.

ing the streets, streets that had once been alive with more than a half million Jews. The frigid winter cold, and even more, an emotional chill, penetrated my very bones as I tried to imagine that once proud pre-War Jewish Warsaw. In its heyday, it may have resembled contemporary Williamsburg, Boro Park, Bnei Brak or Yerushalayim, but looking at it now brings no such image to mind.

As we exit Warsaw, driving towards the town of Ger, my anticipation mounts. “Ger”: the very name stirs so many emotions. While speeding along the highway, I notice a sign with another familiar name: Piacezna! Piacezna, the home of the renowned Chassidic Rebbe and master educator Rabbi Klonimus Kalman Shapira זצ”ל, the Piacezna Rebbe, author of the classic *sefer Chovos Hatalmidim*, which today provides *chizuk* to *yeshiva bachurim* the world over. Notes containing the Chassidic discourses of the Piacezna Rebbe, who during the war became known as the Rebbe of the War-

saw Ghetto, were miraculously found some years after the war near the Ghetto, where they had been secretly buried. Since then, they have been published in a *sefer* entitled *Eish Kodesh*, “Holy Fire.” In the blink of an eye, our car has passed this snow-filled dot on the map where the “*Eish Kodesh*” once burned so fervently.

APPROACHING GORA KALWARIA – GER

Finally I see it: the sign “Gora Kalwaria,” the Polish name for Ger. My heart begins to race. As we traverse its muddy streets, my mind transcends time, recalling the numerous conversations I had had with the many Holocaust survivors who *davened* in the *bais midrash* of my youth. These survivors came from different regions – Poland, Galicia and Hungary. Yet they had at least one point of similarity: the blue/green numbers tattooed on their arms, visible each morning in *shul* as they wrapped their *tefillin* straps around their arms.... Reb Pinchas would vivid-

ly describe the atmosphere in Ger on *Erev Yom Kippur*. The spirited *seudos* of the day epitomized “*Gilu bire’ada* – joy and awe” – the joy of knowing that atonement was close at hand combined with the awesome fear of Yom Kippur.

Then there was Reb Hershel, who disclosed the one memory that he feels kept him alive through six horror-filled years in twelve different concentration camps. That was the occasion shortly before the war when he came before the Gerrer *Rebbe*, the *Imrei Emes* עמ"ט, whose penetrating eyes seemed to look right through him as he commanded: “*Du zolst bleiben a Yid!*”

My memories turned to Reb Meir, an elderly *chassid* who loved nothing more than to sit through a *shiur*, peppering the *maggid shiur* with questions. He once described Sukkos in the Ger of his youth: “We *bachurim* would take our *gartelach*, suspend ourselves from the roof above the *sukka* and thus see the *Rebbe* as he conducted *tisch*.” Recalling Shavuos, the same Reb Meir said, “Many tens of thousands would pack the entire *beis midrash* and the adjacent courtyard; the spiritually charged atmosphere is simply beyond the imagination of today’s generation.”

I recall Reb Pinchas one Simchas Torah describing his encounter with Reb Mattis Gelman מ"ט, the leader of an extremely dedicated group of *bachurim*, *baalei madreiga*, a spiritual elite, who in the ensuing war years, refused to bend



Legions of Gerrer Chassidim at the wedding of the son of the Gerrer Rebbe shlita held in The Gerrer Beis Hamedrash in Yerushalyim, 2002.

to the Nazis. These *bachurim* hid in the Ghetto and forwent their ration cards, their “ticket to life,” so they would not have to submit to the Nazis, nor desecrate *Shabbos* and compromise their exalted level of observance. They learned and starved rather than submit. They danced, singing an exclamation from the *Shacharis* prayers, “*Ashreinu ma tov chelkeinu* – Fortunate are we, how wonderful is our portion,” even at the very doors of the gas chambers. Reb Pinchas describes how Reb Mattis took him aside one *Shabbos* in Ger, whispering a *vort* in his ear; a *vort* that seared his heart and bound his soul with Reb Mattis and with his supreme level of *avodas Hashem* – a bond so strong that despite all Reb Pinchas underwent, it remains firm, a burning ember that refuses to give him respite even now, sixty years later.

THE SYNAGOGUE... JUST AROUND THE CORNER

Shaken out of my reverie by the driver’s sudden announcement that the synagogue is just around the corner, I straighten up in my seat, craning my neck in agitated excitement. As the car pulls into the courtyard, we face an unimpressive stone building with a *Magen David* above the door. “This is synagogue,” he says.

Awaiting our arrival is the last Jew in

Ger, Velvel Karpman. Apparently, Jewish tourists have become his main source of livelihood. He knocks on the door of the apartment building adjacent to the *Beis Midrash*. “I have to get the key from the gentile woman who lives here. Please give her a few dollars. She ensures that her fellow Poles do not vandalize the *shul*.” We quietly pay her. She inserts the key into the old iron lock and it opens with a groan.

The feelings that overcome us as we entered this room, the once thriving, pulsating *Beis Midrash*, were difficult to sort out. In our minds, the building, which had been the crowning glory of pre-War Gerrer *Chassidus*, had taken on enormous proportions. In actual fact, it is not really very large – indeed, barely twice the size of the *shul* where I *daven*. This once proud edifice, the center of so much learning at the highest level, was now completely barren. Yes, once it had certainly been larger than life – the heartbeat of Polish Jewry. Almost every major development in the Jewish world of Eastern Europe was affected by what went on within its walls, and the words of the *Rebbe* who *davened* there. Today, it is smaller than life: a forlorn building, that since the destruction of Polish Jewry until recently served as a furniture warehouse. Now it is barren, except for several benches and tables, and a makeshift bookcase containing a few

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The walls are white and the lighting extremely dingy. A black outline on the front wall serves as evidence of where the *Aron Kodesh* once stood. All quiet and depressing. Could it be that in this forlorn place, generations of Jews were formed into the unique character that was Ger? Could it be that in this drab building Rabbi Moshe Betzalel Alter ז"ל, the *Rebbe's* legendary brother, uttered the *beracha* of "*Lishmo'a kol shofar*" with such fear, that his entire body trembled with the awe of the moment? That *beracha*, they would say, imparted to those who heard it enough *yiras Shamayim* to last the entire year. Could it be that from here emanated the source of strength for all of Reb Mattis's *bachurim* as they hung from those bare beams just to glimpse the *Rebbe* – and later, tragically, as they hung from the gallows in Treblinka? Could it be that the adjacent apartment, where the *Rebbe* had lived and where his balcony can still be seen, is now home to Polish gentiles, people who teamed up with Hitler to kill our nation and profane that holy place? Could it be?

CONCENTRATION, SO ELUSIVE

It is *Mincha* time. I begin *Shemoneh Esrei*, struggling to concentrate in this place where the holy *Imrei Emes*, ז"ל *davened*, in this town where the *Sefas Emes* and *Chiddushei Harim* had lived, and from where eventually tens of thousands of Jews were sent to be murdered in the gas chambers and burnt in the crematoria.

Despite my best efforts, I could not muster the concentration necessary. As I took three steps back, it suddenly became clear to me. I was seeking the holiness of Ger amid deafening silence, amid absence of life, absence of holiness, that holiness I had heard about for so many years. But I was in the wrong place. If I was seeking the holiness of Ger, this was not the place to find it. The *hemshech* (continuity) of the *Imrei Emes*, the *hemshech* of Rav Moshe Betzalel and of Reb Mattis's *bachurim* is still



Left: Inside of building that was the *Beis Hamedrash* of the Gerrer *Rebbe* in Poland, as it looks today.



Right: Outside of same building.

very much alive. But not in this accursed land that had so cruelly and sadistically spat us out. The holiness of Ger can still be found, but it is now in Yerushalayim! And yes, in Bnei Brak, in Ashdod, and in Brooklyn. When one *davens* even a weekday *Mincha*, in the main Gerrer *Beis Midrash* in Geula, the extraordinary *kavana* that is so elusive in the cold, drab *Beis Midrash* in Ger, Poland, is easily attainable. In the courtyard of the *beis midrash* in Yerushalayim, one can still see elder *Chassidim* imparting words of *chizuk* to the younger ones, words that will remain with them for the rest of their lives.

The same, of course, applies to all of the many and familiar names of the European centers of Jewish life. If you want to see the original Mir in Poland, you will find only a primitive post office. The *real* Mir is alive and thriving in Yerushalayim and in Brooklyn.... Slobodka, just outside Kovna in Lithuania, now provides only a picture of drab, Communist ineptitude. Slobodka in Bnei Brak is home to the wonderful legacy of the first Slobodka.... And Satmar? It is no more than a rural, backwater in Romania. The real Satmar thrives and

lives on in Williamsburg and Monroe.

We are witnessing the fulfillment in *Yechezkeil's* prophecy (*Yechezkeil* 37, 3-5): "Can these dry bones come to life? *Hashem* said to these bones, 'Behold I will bring a spirit to you and you will come to life.'"

But not in Poland. There, the past, the wood and stones, remain behind as souvenirs...at best, perhaps, serving as a nostalgic remembrance. But the dry bones have been revived and are ascending, in lands distant from their point of origin, but close – very close – to their spiritual source. ■

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Derech Chaim

BRACHA GOETZ

I have been trying to hold him back
From going to study in
Eretz Yisroel now.

I have been trying to keep him here,
As safe as I possibly could.

"You can go some other time,

G-d willing,

When things calm down there,"

I would tell him,

But he wasn't satisfied

with that response from me.

Isn't that what a mother's role is?

At night, I have lain awake, in tears,

By day, I would seek advice,

This morning I begged for clarity,

And You sent it, at this last hour,

The only answer I could embrace.

I am not just a mother.

It hit me strong and sharp.

I am a Jewish mother,

So there are even higher levels

to my role.

If I really believe it's true

That the way to protect our Land

Is to fill Eretz Yisroel with Torah,

Then what I want is to send him there

at this difficult time.

My first-born son, with his pure

and ever-growing love for

The most powerful endeavor there is.

I can let him go now, as he longs to,

To do all he can

To try to save our Land,

Through learning Torah on its sacred soil,

Giving it the nourishment it craves.

Please G-d, I am giving You my bachur.

I am giving You all the years of effort I

poured into him.

Please accept my hardest struggle

to make my will Your will.

And please don't let him be a korban.

Just let him be one more vessel

sorely needed,

No longer held back,

For held-back blessings to rain down

upon our Land.

Mrs. Bracha Goetz of Baltimore is a frequent contributor to these pages.