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Remembering Grandmother

Victoria: From Beirut to Brooklyn

By Rabbi David Bibi



Victoria and David Gindi of blessed memories

Rosh Hodesh Av is the Yahrzeit of our grandmother Victoria Gindi. My brother Ruby recalled that the doctors told them two days before Rosh Hodesh that she would pass away any minute. He believed that through the power of Tehilim she lived another day and a half to eventually pass away on Rosh Hodesh.

We all felt it was apropos for the daughter of a Kohen, the wife of a Kohen and the mother of Kohanim, a woman who encompassed the dignity of a Bat Kohen and the qualities of her ancestor Aaron to leave the world on the same day as Aaron HaKohen.

Life was Always About Tomorrow and Today is the First Day of the Rest of Your Life

Our grandmother was reluctant to talk of her youth. For her life was always about tomorrow and the understanding that today is the first day of the rest of your life. She had amazing strength and a wonderful attitude and she was truly a brilliant woman. The stories we heard were akin to a real-life Cinderella story.

Victoria Cohen was born in Beirut in the last decade of the 19th century. Her father Haim Cohen was born in Aleppo and was a successful merchant and businessman. In addition to Victoria, he had a second daughter Rachel from his first wife Rose who passed away while her two daughters were very young. Haim remarried and built a magnificent seafront home about fifty miles north of Beirut in Tripoli, an important port city along the Mediterranean.

With his new wife they had more children which the stepmother considered her real children and our grandmother was sent to be educated and live in a convent with the nuns. Although hearing this as a child horrified us, apparently it was not so uncommon among the well to do. There she was educated and was able to read and write in French, English and Arabic which was almost unheard of among anyone in the day, especially young girls.

Found Comfort in Reading Books

Her refuge from her stepmother must have been in the books she surrounded herself with. Later in America, she read constantly, and was the person the other women came to with their letters from the old country. Our grandmother read the letters and helped by writing back on behalf of her neighbors, relatives and friends. Many men complained to their wives asking why they couldn't read as David Gindi's wife. She tried to teach her grandchildren to read and write Arabic. My sister and brother had notebooks. I don't think any of us were very good students.

Our grandfather David Gindi was born in Aleppo. His father Jack owned a store within the famous Aleppo market selling household items. His great grandchildren, our cousins have a copy of the deed although I am not sure property in Aleppo is worth much these days.

David's older brother Moshe left for America in 1907. The family held British passports through Manchester. The story is well known of how the Sadik and Mekubal – Haham Moshe became a great rabbi. Moshe returned from America to Aleppo in 1909 as a very wealthy man. He wanted to marry Nizha Dweck, the

daughter of the saintly Haham and Rabbi, Yishak Dweck, but they didn't want a rich man, they wanted a scholar. So, Moshe accepted upon himself to learn and eventually became one of the greatest scholars and leading kabbalist in the community.

Seeing the success of their brother, David and his older brother Isaac left for America. Once they arrived in New York, they sought out their cousin Haron Gindi who was a partner of Isaac Shalom. They too succeeded and two years later, they too returned to Aleppo. But representatives of the Turkish army were waiting and they were drafted. The army was hell for them and we heard of being strung upside down and beaten with cane over bare feet.

Meeting His Future Wife

David managed to elude fighting in the Balkan War and successfully managed to be stationed along the coast. One weekend, he made his way to Tripoli where there was a Jewish community connected to his Aleppo home so he could enjoy a Shabbat. There he met and fell in love with the young Victoria.

We were told of her beauty, long black hair and deep-set dark eyes against very pale skin. She was striking and took one's breath away. With the goal of getting back to her and getting out of the army, David managed to bribe his way free. Returning to Tripoli, the handsome young man married Victoria who was only too happy to get away from her stepmother. The young couple had children and remained in Aleppo for the first world war.

At its conclusion David thought it best to return to the States. He left Victoria and three children and went back to America. A year later he returned for his family. According to my aunt Sally he went back ahead of them and our grandmother traveled pregnant with our uncle Hymie and with aunt Sally, uncle Jack and aunt Rose in tow.

Guarding that Valuable Melon

We worry about taking a couple of kids on a twelve-hour flight to Israel, can we imagine being pregnant and taking three children on one ship from Beirut to Marseilles and then on a second ship to Ellis Island. Aunt Sally told us how she transported gold coins from her grandfather hidden from all within a melon that she held onto for dear life the entire time.

Upon arriving Victoria was afraid that being pregnant would void her entry so she tightly wrapped herself trying to hide the condition. She was always very thin preaching unlike any other grandmother that "food is poison, only eat what you need". An official whispered to her and told her not to worry, she would be allowed entry, and to please unwrap herself so as not to injure the baby. Uncle Hymie was born three months later on a blustery December day on the Lower East side.

David Gindi wanted to buy buildings and so that's what he did. In the decade before the depression, he purchased ten properties and although in the crash he lost most of them, he held on to some in Brooklyn including the corners of 65th Street and Bay Parkway where they lived before moving to Ocean Parkway. After the depression, he continued to buy properties.

We lived in a two-family house with our grandparents and spent many summers in Bradley Beach in the same home as them. Although my grandfather passed away when I was young, my grandmother continued to live with us in Deal.

Very often we find ourselves in difficult situations. We need to remember that everything is relative. When things happen, I try to imagine our grandparents in that situation. They were incredibly strong and capable people and we truly owe what we are and have become to them.

What we call difficulties, they would have called luxuries. We have cell phones, running water, Amazon deliveries, cars, planes, air conditioning, electricity, microwaves, and so much more.

Reframing the Realities of Today's Problems

Every once in a while, when you have a problem, take yourself back 100 years and reframe that problem. Recall where we came from and how we got here. (I have been reading holocaust biographies in the last few months and that really makes us ponder of the miracle of our survival.). We need to think of how they would perceive our problems and in imagining that realign our paradigm and perspective and it will make for much healthier lives.

Reprinted from the Parshat Shabbat Shalom from Cyberspace Matot-Masei 5783.

The Mattress Magnate

The following is an amazing story told in Rabbi Yoel Gold's Stories to Inspire series.

A bride and groom walked into a big furniture supplier and looked around and noticed the clear financial success of the incredible company. The father of the groom approached the owner and asked him how he achieved such success in his life. The owner told him, "It's a funny story, actually."

"Years ago, my rabbi suggested to me that I become a councilman for my city. This position never really crossed my mind before, so I wasn't planning on taking the race too seriously. But since my rabbi wanted me to try, I decided to go for it.

“Another Jewish man in the race really wanted to win. I didn’t take it personally, since I wasn’t attached to winning, but he was determined to get me to lose the race. He got ahold of my cell number and took out these big, elaborate ads in all the newspapers and magazines, and with my number, posted MATTRESSES ½ PRICE!”

The owner continued, “When the ads started running, my phone began to ring off the hook. I got a ton of phone calls, saying, ‘Hi, I’d like two twin mattresses, please.’ I said, ‘Mattresses? I don’t sell mattresses.’ This went on for a few days before I saw the ad myself and caught on.

“I spoke to my rabbi, and he said if I wanted to, I was allowed to explain to the callers that the ad was published to undermine me in the race for councilman. I thought about it and remembered that if Hashem does everything for the best, then I could make the best of this strange situation.”



“During the next phone call I received, I took measurements and an exact specific order from the caller. I started to take all the orders and record them in a little notebook. After one week, I counted all my orders and took it to a mattress supplier. I had orders for over 1,400 mattresses!!

“I ran the numbers and requested to pay a specific, low price since it was a tremendous bulk buy, and I would be making a small profit on each one. I hired a delivery guy and delivered the orders within the next week, and every purchase was paid in full. It was a huge success!”

“With word-of-mouth and amazing Siyata Deshmaya, somehow, before I knew it, I was selling mattresses, and then bedroom sets, then dining room sets, and then I opened up a storefront, and the company grew and grew before my eyes!!! Instead of making an enemy of someone who tried to cut me down, I chose to accept Hashem’s Will with love, and I know He was and is the source of my wonderful parnasah.”

Reprinted from Jack Rahmey’s Matot-Masei 5783 email based on the Torah teachings of Rabbi Amram Sananes.

The Lesson of The Twisted Leg

It was a simple twist of the leg. Or so I thought. Turns out that I had sustained a more serious injury. How one split second can transform a routine daily schedule into a revolving door of doctors, scans, and physical therapists. My left leg was encased in an orthopedic boot which extended until right below my knee.

I was told that I could walk normally with the boot, as it would rock and allow my injury to heal. I wasn’t so sure about “walking normally” as I found myself hobbling awkwardly along, at a much slower pace than I was used to. The boot limited me a great deal.

Determined to be a Good Physical Therapy Student

Physical therapy became part of my life, with “homework” exercises taking up quite some time. I was determined to be a good student, as I was told that diligence in exercises expedites the recovery. One day, I decided to take the kids out to the park. It was the type of beautiful, sunny day when it would have been a pity to stay indoors. We had a wonderful time at the park, the kids soaking up the fresh air and sunshine, giggling and squealing as they slid down the slide for the umpteenth time.

When it was time to go home, I wheeled them in the double stroller. As I was crossing a street at an intersection (I had the right of way), a car making a left turn from the main road starting honking incessantly. He did not remove his hand from the steering wheel, as he honked steadily.

He even opened his window and raised his voice at me, something to the effect of how slowly I was walking across the street. He didn’t notice my orthopedic

boot. He didn't bother to think that there was a reason I was walking so slowly, that perhaps I really wasn't doing so to intentionally irritate him and delay him!

He made the turn, his car screeching just a foot behind me, with a few more unpleasant words emanating from his car window. How many seconds of time did I cause him to lose? Five, maybe seven... His rude manner would have been inexcusable for even a person without injury.

It got me thinking: did the driver stop to think as to why I was walking so slowly? And do I ever stop to think about why others are doing something that is irritating me? (The Weekly Vort)

Reprinted from the Parshat Matot-Masei 5783 email of Shabbat Shalom from Cyberspace.

Understanding the Blessing Of the Chofetz Chaim

Rav Sholom Schwadron, zt"l, would tell over an amazing story. A Rav in America became a Jewish Chaplain in a hospital. One day, he was called to the ICU for a young Jewish man who had been in a terrible car accident, R"L. The doctors told the Chaplain to call the man's family, because he didn't have long to live.

A sister arrived and said that they had an elderly father who lived in a retirement home. The Rav went to pick up the father and brought him to say goodbye to his son. The father looked at his son who was hooked up to numerous machines, yet he seemed quite calm!

The Father Was Told that His Son Was Not Going to Live

The doctor told the father that the situation was severe, and these were his son's final hours. The father turned to the Rabbi and asked to be driven home. On the way home the Rav couldn't contain himself and asked the elder father for an explanation for his behavior.

The father replied, "I come from Radin, the city of the Chofetz Chaim. When he printed the Mishnah Brurah, he wanted to see how people would react to his Sefer. He gathered together a group of working men, and I was one of those people in the group, and he began learning the Mishnah Brurah with us.

My participation in the Shiur must have pleased him, because the Chofetz Chaim gave me a double Brachah. He said that I would live a long life, and that none of my children would die in my lifetime. Therefore, I am certain that I have more years to live, and my son will recover. I have a firm Emunah in the Brachah of the Chofetz Chaim, and my son will not die as long as I am alive!"



When the Rav heard the father's incredible story, he also went home and didn't return to the hospital until the next day. The following day when he checked on the patient, the doctors told him that they had been certain that he would pass away overnight, but he didn't, and in the morning, he had even opened his eyes!

They couldn't understand what had happened! Just two weeks later, the young man got out of bed, and was released from the hospital. Rav Schwadron would say that the fact that the Chofetz Chaim's Brachos were so powerful was not the amazing thing. It was the pure Emunah that this father had in the Brachah of the Chofetz Chaim, and his ability to remain calm and unshaken while staring at his son's imminent death, that was really special!

Reprinted from the Parshas Mattos-Masei 5783 email of Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg's Torah U'Tefilah.

Toras Avigdor Junior

The Grouchy Astronaut

By Aharon Spetner



Illustrated by Miri Weinreb

Moishy and Yossi's eyes opened wide as the car turned towards the front gate of Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas. On their right they saw a huge Boeing 747 jet with what looked like a space shuttle on top of it!

"Totty, is that an actual space shuttle on top of that plane?" Moishy asked in wonder.

"No, it's just a replica," Totty said. "But that airplane is real and it used to carry actual space shuttles back to Florida when they sometimes landed in California."

"That's amazing," breathed Moishy.

“This is like a whole city!” Yossi said after Totty presented his ID badge to the guard and they drove into the space center. There were buildings everywhere, and there were even actual rockets on display.

Entering the Mission Control Center

It took about three minutes of driving through the massive complex until they reached Building 30 and Totty parked in front. On the side of the building was a large sign which read “Christopher C. Kraft, Jr. Mission Control Center”.

“Is this the building you work in?” Moishy asked.

“It is,” smiled Totty. “Come, let’s go inside.”

In the lobby of the building was a large colorful banner which read “Bring Your Child to Work Day”.

“Welcome to Space Center Houston,” said a smiling worker, who handed each of the boys a NASA activity packet.

“Thank you,” Moishy and Yossi said to the worker as they walked past and followed Totty to three steel doors under a sign which read “Mission Control Center”. Totty swiped his keycard next to one of the doors and the three of them walked inside.

“Welcome to the flight control room,” Totty said as the boys took in the scene of the many mission control specialists sitting at the desks which were all facing the front of the room.

On the huge screens on the wall, they saw two astronauts in space suits. The boys had never seen anything like this before!

Viewing the Extravehicular Activity - Spacewalk

“This is my desk,” Totty said. “As you can see on the monitors, two astronauts are about to begin an ‘EVA’, which stands for ‘extravehicular activity’ - otherwise known as a ‘spacewalk’. It is my job to monitor the data that is transmitted from the astronauts’ spacesuits to ensure that they are safe when working in the vacuum of space.

Totty logged into his computer and the boys watched as two other astronauts dressed in regular clothes finished inspecting the space suits. A few minutes later, a voice came over the loudspeaker: “Houston, station. Suit checkout complete.”

A man sitting near Totty with the title ‘CAPCOM’ on his desk pressed a button on his microphone. “Roger, station. You are go for airlock transition.”

The boys watched eagerly as the suited astronauts were helped by their partners into the airlock. It took some time before they finally exited the space station and went out into space, but it was fascinating to watch.

The screen switched camera angles and now they could see a view from outside the station as the astronauts made their way outside. The mission controllers

were in constant radio communication with the astronauts as they began working on fixing a solar panel which had been damaged by a micrometeorite strike.

"Houston, EVA-1 with request." cackled a voice over the radio.

"Go ahead with request, Brad." replied CAPCOM.

"Do you guys know that there is no phillips screwdriver in my toolbag? Who wrote the checklist for this EVA? Do you know how much more time it will take me to get this panel open with a flathead screwdriver?"

"We copy your statement," CAPCOM replied. "We will look into it."

The astronauts continued working, but the astronaut named Brad seemed to keep having things to say over the radio. Next he said his space suit was too cold, and after that he said he didn't like the size of the handle on his wrench. It seemed that every few minutes there was something else that he was unhappy with.

At the end of the day, the boys walked with Totty back to their car.

Can't Understand the Astronaut's Complaints

"Totty," Yossi said. "I don't understand what that astronaut kept complaining to you guys about. Weren't you all working hard to keep him safe while he was working outside the space station? I didn't even hear him say thank you once."

"Yes, it was sad to see that," Totty answered. "It is such a terrible midah to have, to complain against Hashem."

"Complain against Hashem?" asked Yossi, confused. "He was complaining about the people at NASA. He didn't even mention Hashem once."

"Well think about it," Totty said, as they drove past the space shuttle replica on top of the plane. "Who is the one who decides what we will have and how our day will go? It's Hashem. So when someone complains, who are they actually complaining about? It's not only a lack of hakoras hatov to other people - it's also not recognizing what Hashem does for you."

"Oh my, I never thought about it like that," Yossi said. "I always try not to be a complainer, but I didn't realize that any complaint is also a complaint against Hashem."

Have A Wonderful Shabbos!

Takeaway:

Whenever we complain it's a complaint against Hashem. People who trust in Hashem know that the world is a good place full of happiness, and there is no reason to be a grouch.

Reprinted from the Parshas Devorim 5783 Toras Avigdor Junior adapted from the teachings of Rav Avigdor Miller, zt"l.

The Power of a Smile



One Erev Yom Kippur, Rav Yisroel Salanter, zt"l, the founder the Mussar movement, met a person on the way to Shul for Kol Nidrei. Rav Yisroel greeted him warmly, but this person was so absorbed with the seriousness of Yom Kippur, that he did not return the greeting.

Rav Yisroel then remarked to his student, Rav Itzele Peterburg, "Why must I suffer because of his preoccupation with the Yom HaDin?" Rav Yisroel taught that regardless of one's mood, he has a responsibility to greet everyone in a cheerful and pleasant manner. Rav Yisroel Salanter further taught that one's face is a Reshus HaRabim, as it is in the public.

One's thoughts and mood are in his mind, and that is in Reshus HaYachid, on private property, and one should keep that to himself. But his face is something that everyone can see and it is part of the public domain, and one must make sure that others see pleasantness on him.

The Alter of Slabodka, Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, zt"l, expanded this idea and taught that the expression on one's face can affect the mood of those around him, and that is why the face is considered to be within the public domain. As proof of this, he would point out that when one is walking about outside, he will never actually see his own face, other than through a reflection. But the look on his face is visible to everyone else.

Rav Avraham Grodzinsky, zt"l, exemplified this teaching. He would spend a great deal of time in front of the mirror practicing his smile, and he worked for two

full years to acquire this Middah of greeting others cheerfully, and he did this even while living through the horrors of the Holocaust.

In the ghettos during World War II, his face was always shining, despite the horrible challenges. Rav Shlomo Wolbe, zt"l, would talk about his father-in-law, Rav Avraham Grodzinsky, and how he spent much time working on how he would greet people with a smile.



Rav Avraham Grodzinsky

Rav Wolbe would tell people, “Look in the mirror and smile until you see a smile that you want to greet other people with. A smile doesn’t cost any money, and it doesn’t take any time, but with it, you are accomplishing great things. You are doing Chesed with your smile!”

In fact, Rav Simcha Bunim Cohen would say that the reason mirrors were created is so that we can practice our smiles!

Reprinted from the Parshas Mattos-Masei 5783 email of Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg’s Torah U’Tefilah.