

SLICE OF LIFE

Law School Waited, My Neshama Couldn't
By Ariel Feffer

My Judaism lived in a strange middle space. I grew up around Chabad. It was warm and familiar, something that framed my life without ever demanding too much of me. By the time I was in college at Arizona State, my Chabad house was where my friends were. It was where I laughed, ate, stayed late, and felt grounded socially. For a long time, that was enough.

On Friday nights, I would light Shabbos candles in my apartment, pause just long enough to feel that the week was shifting, and then sit back down at my desk to keep studying for the LSAT. It was an in-between version of observance. Eventually, I would pack up my books and spend the rest of Shabbos at Chabad. That rhythm felt safe. I did not have to ask too many questions about what I was doing or why.

At the time, my entire world revolved around one plan: law school. It had been my goal since fifth grade, and every decision I made pointed in that direction. Judaism mattered to me, but it sat quietly in the background while I focused on building a future that felt clear and controlled.

That certainty cracked during my junior year.

It was Simchas Torah, October 7th. At ASU, there is a tradition of dancing in the fountain at the center of campus. That year, no one moved. People stood around, unsure whether it felt right



Ariel Feffer

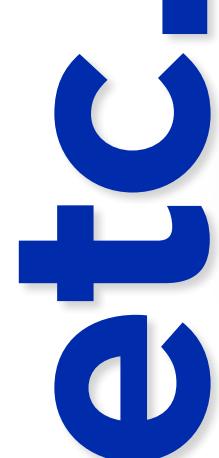
This Stunning 40-Foot Mural Greets Visitors at Mikvah Chana's New Center in Tzfat



Days of Creation through generations of Jewish women.

Created over two years in Muchnik's Brooklyn studio and installed in Israel in three weeks, the mural enhances a center that adds education and inspiration to the mikvah experience for local women and visitors.

The project reflects a shift begun in 1975, when the Rebbe elevated family purity as a foundational mitzvah, urging communities to build beautiful, welcoming mikvahs and placing the practice alongside core mitzvot like tefillin and kosher.



to celebrate at all. I remember the weight of the moment, the hesitation, and then turning to my rabbi and saying, "If we do not dance, they win." So we danced.

That moment stayed with me. I realized that I could not keep my Judaism compartmentalized, something I visited only when it was comfortable. In the months that followed, I poured myself into advocacy. I testified on bills, challenged administrators, ran for and won a seat on my university's student government, and spent countless hours defending Israel on campus. At the same time, I naturally began keeping more of Shabbos and becoming more careful with kashrus. But much of that year was fueled by anger, anger at those trying to hurt us, anger at those who stayed silent, and, if I am honest, anger toward Hashem.

That summer, I went to Israel thinking it would be a pause. A chance to breathe before returning home to start my internship at the Attorney General's Office and continue moving forward exactly as planned. My sister and friends stayed longer in Jerusalem to attend a learning program. I did not plan to. Learning was not part of the picture.

And then one Shabbos, at the Kotel, I met a woman named Tal.

She wore a rainbow tie-dye scarf with the Nova Festival logo. She told me how her boyfriend had jumped in front of her and caught a grenade, saving her life at the cost of his own.

She introduced me to her friends nearby, each carrying their own story. As I looked around, I realized the plaza was filled with people wearing the same scarves.

Tal explained that they were there, davening and keeping Shabbos in honor of friends who had been taken hostage or murdered.

Standing there, something in me softened. I felt my anger loosen its grip. I could not hold onto mine while watching people who had lost everything show up with such faith. That Shabbos changed me. From then on, I fully kept Shabbos.

Wanting more did not come with clarity. It came with tension. I started thinking about staying to learn, about what it would mean to choose something that did not fit neatly into my

plan. But I was afraid of delaying my future, of what my friends would think, of stepping into a version of myself I did not yet recognize.

When I spoke to my rabbi a few days later, he told me that deepening my Judaism would not take anything away from me. It would sharpen everything else. Still, the timing felt impossible. My internship required me back in Arizona within two weeks. I asked for an extension, expecting to hear no. On Gimmel Tammuz, I heard back. They pushed my start date, and I could stay.

It was only ten extra days, but they changed the direction of my year. Back in Arizona, learning filled the spaces of my life: podcasts between classes, chavrusas wherever I could find them. I fell in love with Chassidus, and the idea of learning full time became real.

It still felt unreasonable. I had just been accepted to law school. This was not the path I was supposed to interrupt.

And yet, the thought would not leave me.

I applied to defer one year, even after being strongly advised against it. The dean was Jewish and offered me a year deferral, though they could not guarantee my scholarship. I took it anyway, unsure whether this choice would quietly close doors I had worked so hard to open. I worried about how I would explain myself and whether I would feel alone.

Instead, I found myself in classrooms with girls whose stories echoed mine—girls who had also lived in the in-between, balancing ambition, fear, faith, and timing. Slowly, the thing I had worried about most, losing connection, turned into the thing I gained.

Just a few days ago, I heard back from the law school. Not only did they renew my scholarship, they increased it by eight thousand dollars. It felt like a reminder that choosing growth does not mean losing what is meant for you.

This year has taught me that growth rarely arrives fully formed. Sometimes it begins in the uncomfortable middle, in the moment when you stop studying, light candles, and do not go back to your desk. Sometimes it begins when you choose to show up, unsure of how everything will work out, but willing to trust that it will.

THE BAAL SHEM TOV

The Baal Shem Tov, meaning "the Master of the Good Name," was born Yisrael, son of Eliezer and Sara on Elul 18, 1698. His teachings, emphasizing the worth of every Jew in G-d's eyes, lifted the spirits of the Jews at that time. He also attracted some of the greatest spiritual giants of his age to his foundational Chassidic teachings. Two of his main teachings are: to love every Jew regardless of his status; and everything that happens is a result of Divine Providence. When the Baal Shem Tov ascended to the heavenly chamber of Moshiach, he asked, "When will you come?" Moshiach replied: "When your teachings will be spread out."

The Rebbe Writes

from correspondence of the Lubavitcher Rebbe

Greeting and Blessing:

I duly received your letter of January the 15th. In general, anything which may have even the remotest connection with Avoda Zara [idolatry] is something which a Jew should give a wide berth to and have nothing to do with it, not even to have any discussions about it, either with one's self or with others.

Even if there is doubt whether it is Avoda Zara, it is sufficient reason for a Jew to run away from it. Needless to say, any possible "benefit" that you mention that one might get from it, you could certainly get through Lehadil [to separate] the observance of the Mitzvah of prayer in accordance with the Shulchan Aruch [Code of Jewish Law], which goes back to Mattan Torah [the Giving of the Torah] at Sinai, and which a Jew is dutybound to observe three times a day.

Rabbi Lipskar could explain to you in greater detail all about it. It is hardly necessary to emphasize that the benefit you will get from observing Tefillah [prayer] three times a day is a true and lasting benefit, and incomparably greater to any benefit that one can find in strange pastures, G-d forbid. There is no need to elaborate on this. I would suggest that you should have your Tefillin checked to make sure they are Kosher, and it would be good also to have the Mezuzos of your home checked.

If you will only learn with a desire to understand, you will certainly understand. And while you will not understand it as deeply as those who have been learning it for a long time, you should remember that the same applies to the learning of Chumash [Five Books of Moses], Gemara [Talmud], etc.

There is the principle which applies to all parts of the Torah: "If one says, he has tried hard but did not succeed, don't believe him." The reverse is also true, and likewise in all parts of the Torah: "If one says, he has not tried but succeeded, do not believe him." See more on this subject in [the booklet] Kuntres Limud Hachasidus.

MOSHIACH MATTERS

A person is like the tree of the field." (Deut. 20:19) A person is compared to a tree. A tree produces fruits which in turn cause other fruit-producing trees to grow. In like manner, we shouldn't suffice with our own growth in matters of Torah and good deeds. We should produce fruits with seeds for new trees and new fruits.

my father-in-law of saintly memory on the tenth of Shevat, about which you no doubt heard from Rabbi Lipskar, I trust that you are familiar with the significance of this day, especially with the life and work of the Baal Hahilul [person whose yartzeit is being observed], and how much hope and confidence he placed in our Jewish youth for the preservation of our sacred heritage.

28th of Shevat, 5725 [1965]

I received your letter written on the day before the hilula [anniversary of passing] of my father-in-law of saintly memory. As requested, I will remember you in prayer in the matters about which you write. I trust that you participated in the observance of the hilula, and may the inspiration be with you throughout the year. With blessing,

P.S. In reply to your question how to divide your time between self-advancement in study and helping others, it is of course impossible to set definite limits.

However, it is clear that provision should be made for both, as our Sages ruled (which you quote), "He who declares I will have nothing but Torah, etc." As for your question whether you should learn Tanya [the basic book of Chabad Chasidic philosophy] in view of your difficulty to understand it- this is obviously a surprising question. Why should you not understand it?

If you will only learn with a desire to understand, you will certainly understand. And while you will not understand it as deeply as those who have been learning it for a long time, you should remember that the same applies to the learning of Chumash [Five Books of Moses], Gemara [Talmud], etc.

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A WORD

FROM THE DIRECTOR

In Memory of Rabbi Shmuel M. Butman, Director of the Lubavitch Youth Organization and Founder of the L'chaim Publication.

From the Archives

It's almost Tu B'Shevat (this year Monday, February 2), that fruit-eating and tree-planting time of year. Now, someone out there might be wondering what he would do if he was in the middle of planting a tree and Moshiach came.

Interestingly enough, one of our Sages answered that question over 1,500 years ago! Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai used to say: "If there is a plant in your hand when they say to you: 'Behold, the Moshiach!'—go and plant the seedling, and afterward go out to greet him."

What does this mean to you? Take a moment to think about it and then read on. "Behold, Moshiach is coming." The Rebbe made this statement publicly at numerous gatherings. One might conjecture that, once such powerful statement were made, all that was left for us to do was sit around and wait for some kind of high-tech, multi-media, miraculous event to take place which would herald the Messianic Era.

On the contrary, the Rebbe told us to prepare ourselves to greet Moshiach by performing acts of goodness and kindness, doing more mitzvot, studying more Torah, and performing mitzvot in a more perfect manner. "Go and plant the seedling," the Rebbe tells us.

Continue and increase all of the good and G-dly things you are presently doing. Learn more. Give more. Do more. For the more we plant now, the more bountiful will be our harvest in the Messianic Era. When Moshiach comes, the presence and life-giving energy of the Master of the Universe will be totally revealed in every aspect of our lives. "Go and plant the seedling," Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai tells us. And surely, with all the fruits of our labor, from all the seedlings we have planted, we will be able to greet Moshiach in a dignified and proud manner.

Shmuel Butman

L'ZICHRON CHAYA I MUSHKA

לזכרון חייה ומושקה

The name of our publication has special meaning. It stands for the name of Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka Schneerson (obm), wife of the Rebbe.

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