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A Final Passage, From China to Israel or “No Jew Will Be Left Behind”

By Ashira Weiss



A Jewish man dies alone in Suzhou, China. Chabad engages an international effort to prevent cremation and bring his body to burial in Israel.

As Shavuot ended, Rabbi **Shalom Greenberg** of Chabad of Shanghai turned on his phone to check messages he'd missed over the two-day holiday. One was from Israel: A Jew in Suzhou, about sixty miles from Shanghai, was found dead, alone in his apartment. Could the rabbi help with burial arrangements? Although it is a major city in the Jiangsu Province of East China, with a population of about 10 million, Suzhou has no Jewish community. The few Jews who live there travel to Shanghai for their Jewish needs.

Michael-Lasar Bischoffberger, 60, was born Michael Rabinowitz, in Donetsk, Ukraine and later moved to Germany. Some years ago, he moved to Suzhou where he taught private music lessons. Now, just two and a half weeks shy of his 61st birthday, he suffered a massive cardiac arrest. His sister—his only next-of-kin—was thousands of miles away.

No Longer Any Jewish Cemeteries in China

Although historically China was home to large Jewish communities, there are no longer any Jewish cemeteries in China, so the rabbi, who has served the Jewish community of Shanghai and its environs since 1998, has been through this route before. He called **Vicky Fischblitz**, Michael's niece back, and took her through the steps required for the remains to be brought to Israel for burial.

It wasn't long before Vicky was on the phone again. She and her mother, **Anna Rabinowitz**, had encountered the first hurdle of what would turn out to be numerous obstacles in Michael's final journey.

Michael had changed his name three times during his lifetime, and Suzhou authorities wouldn't release his body without a birth certificate proving that he was who his family said he was. The only copies of Michael's birth certificate lay in the municipal archives of war-torn Donetsk, where Michael was born, and in Michael's apartment.

Greenberg searched his memory. Though most had left the country when the pandemic began, there was still a Jew in Suzhou—the only one as far as Greenberg knew. A few months earlier, **Ed Frumkes** needed a yahrzeit candle and called the rabbi. Now the rabbi needed him. Without a moment's hesitation, Ed agreed to accompany the police to Michael's apartment to retrieve the birth certificate of a fellow Jew he'd never met.

“I'll Find the Money”

But matters soon became complicated. Michael was a German citizen, having lived in Germany from the early nineties until his move to China a few years back, and only the German consulate could handle his repatriation. Consulate officials informed the family that their request to transport Michael's body had

been met with a firm negative by Chinese authorities. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, China was not allowing transport of any corpses between provinces.

At the same time, Anna learned that the cost of repatriating Michael's remains to Israel would be \$20,000, a sum she couldn't conceive of raising. Anna and Vicky were ready to give up.

Rabbi Greenberg wouldn't.

He advised Anna to make arrangements for Michael's burial in Israel and send him the documentation. He also told the family to engage an international human remains repatriation company with experience in repatriation to and from China. Roseates, a China-based firm, agreed to represent the family, and asked them to sign a contract. Once again, Anna turned to Rabbi Greenberg. How could she sign a contract that she knew she wouldn't be able to afford? "Send me the contract and I'll find the money," was the rabbi's response.

"Truthfully, I didn't know where I would get the money," Greenberg told *Lubavitch.com*. "But I figured if we didn't get anywhere with the authorities, there would be nothing to pay for. And if it came to the point where G-d had found a way for us to transport him to Israel, G-d would also find a way for us to pay for it."



Passport image of Michael Bischoffberger

An International Crisis?

It was now June 8, fifteen days after Michael's passing. Rabbi Greenberg turned to the Israeli consulate in Shanghai with the contract proving that Michael would be buried in Israel and requested their help. Consul **Limor Gadi** moved quickly. She had the burial documents translated from Hebrew to Chinese,

notarized, and forwarded to every Chinese official she knew. But no one would budge.

“I decided to do what we’re trained to do as *shluchim*—we don’t take no for an answer,” Greenberg said. He’d have to think outside the box.

So he called another colleague, Rabbi **Yehuda Tiechtel**, Chabad representative and Chief Rabbi of Berlin, Germany. Rabbi Tiechtel made a few calls and was soon put through to **Frank Hartmann**, Commissioner for Crisis Management at the Federal Foreign Office, who reports directly to the Foreign Minister.

Tiechtel’s efforts were effective. Hartmann’s office contacted the consulate in Shanghai, suggesting they work it out with local authorities before this becomes an international crisis. “I think the local officials were quite surprised to receive a call from the Foreign Ministry,” Rabbi Greenberg said. “They didn’t realize how seriously Jews take their burial rites.”

Suzhou officials promised to find a province from which Michael’s body could be flown to Beijing and on to Israel.

“A Jew in Australia”

Now that they were beginning to see movement, Greenberg realized he would have to make good on his promise about the money. Once again, he turned to his colleagues. Posting on a WhatsApp group for Chabad representatives to Asia, he asked if anyone knew of an organization or individual that might help cover the costs. A colleague, requesting anonymity, called Greenberg with the number of a Jew in Australia who he said might be willing to help.

Greenberg contacted the individual who also asked to remain anonymous—and was astounded at the response: “Send an invoice and the money will be transferred to Roseates’ account within twenty-four hours.” The total was close to \$22,000.

Journey Interrupted

On June 19, Michael’s remains began a 2,000 km (1,243 mile) journey to Chengdu, from where they would be flown to Beijing. “The logistics were bizarre,” Greenberg said. “Imagine if you were in Milwaukee and wanted to catch an international flight from New York. Instead of just driving to Chicago and flying to New York from there, you’d drive to LA and then fly from there to New York.” But this was the only way they could do it.

It seemed Michael’s body was well on its way. So Rabbi Greenberg caught his own flight to the USA to join his wife and children who left at the beginning of February when the pandemic ravaged Beijing. When the rabbi arrived in America, however, he discovered Michael’s journey was still not over.

The coffin was heavier than the cargo limit permitted on Chengdu-to-Beijing flights. More negotiations followed, and an allowance was made. On June 22, twenty-nine days after his passing, Michael’s body arrived in Beijing, where EL AL would not accept his death certificate—which stated that the cause of death was cardiac arrest—as proof that he was COVID-free.

Rabbi Greenberg contacted **Yehuda Meshi-Zahav**, founder and chairman of Zaka Search and Rescue—an organization dedicated to giving victims of terror, accidents, or natural disasters a Jewish burial. “The only option he will have in China is cremation. We must find a way to get him to Israel,” Greenberg implored. By Monday, June 29, Meshi-Zahav had secured all necessary permissions and arrangements were made for Michael’s remains to be carried on the July 2 flight to Israel.



Rabbi Shalom and Dina Greenberg in Shanghai (2019)

But on the morning of July 2, EL AL pilots announced that they were on strike—all flights were grounded.

Working together, Roseates, Rabbi Greenberg, and Limor managed to get the necessary paperwork transferred, and the coffin was loaded onto a Tel Aviv-bound Turkish Airways flight, departing Beijing on July 5 with a connection in Istanbul.

Forty-five days, four rabbis, the German foreign ministry, an Israeli consul, an Australian philanthropist, two airlines, and a slew of helpers selflessly dedicating hundreds of cumulative hours in six countries on three continents,

brought Michael-Lasar Bischoffberger to his final resting place at a cemetery in Pardes Chana, Israel, last Thursday.

“This is a testament to the Jewish people,” Rabbi Greenberg said. “None of those who got involved gained any personal benefit, just extra headaches. Yet every one of them—whether it was Ed who searched the apartment of a Jew he’d never met, or the EL AL cargo manager who assured me that whenever the coffin was ready to go she would personally make space in the cargo—came forth and said *hineni*—I’m here, and I will do whatever I can to help a fellow Jew.”

Reprinted from the Summer 2020 Magazine of Lubavitch International.

The Thief and Kriyas Shema



A thief in the forest captured a Jew, and the thief offered to grant him his last wish [before executing him]. He said that he wanted to say Shema, and permission was granted.

The Jew said Shema with immense concentration. When he reached the words, *אמת ה' אלקיכם* he opened his eyes and saw that the thief wasn't there anymore. He ran out of the forest with joy.

He went to his rebbe, Reb Yehudah Asad *zt'l*, and told him what happened. The student asked, "But what does this story mean? Why did it happen? What was Heaven showing me?"

Reb Yehudah Asad asked him, "Did you ever say kriyas Shema like that before?"

The student admitted that he hadn't.

"Then that's your answer. Heaven was showing you how kriyas Shema should be said. Now say it that way every day.

Reprinted from the Parshas Voeschanon 5780 email of Torah Wellsprings: Collected Thoughts from Rabbi Elimelech Biderman.

The Legacy of Reb Menachem Rikanti



Title page of the first edition of Rabbi Recanati's commentary on the Torah (Venice, 1523)

Reb Menachem Rikanti (who lived in the era of the Rosh and the Rashba) is an example of someone who reached very high levels in Torah due to the combination of tefillah and hasmadah.

His story is written in the hakdamah of his Sefer, the "Rikanti": "Reb Menachem Rikanti loved Torah, but he was born with a very weak mind. He prayed a lot, and he fasted that Hashem should open his heart and mind to understand Torah.

Once, on one of his fast days, as he prayed to be able to learn Torah, he fell asleep in the beis medresh. In his dream, he saw someone holding a bottle of water in his hand. This man woke up Reb Menachem Rikanti and told him to drink from the water.

Before Reb Menachem finished drinking, the man disappeared. Reb Menachem returned to his studies, and he saw that his mind was sharp. He had become a new person. That's when he wrote his commentaries on the Torah..."

This occurred when Reb Menachem Rikanti was approximately eighty years old — two years before his petirah. All the tefillos of his life paid off, and in the

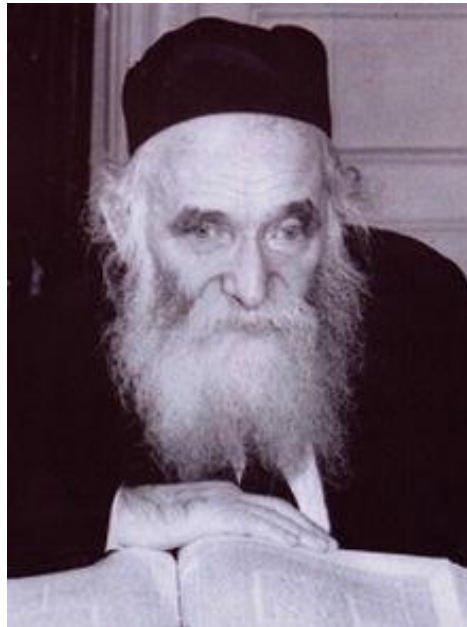
learning well because, in addition to having no background in Torah, the bachur had a terrible memory. Even if he reviewed something a hundred times, he forgot it by the next day.

But the bachur so much wanted to succeed in Torah, so he didn't give up. He kept learning with hasmadah with the chavrusos that the Chasam Sofer arranged for him. Chazal say, "מסייעין אותו הבא לטהר", "When one wants to be pure, Heaven helps him" and indeed, this bachur became a great talmid chacham and was renowned for his yirei shamayim.

He held rabbanic positions, and was one of the rabbanim in the Mattersdorf beis din (under the auspices of the Chasam Sofer). Later he was the rav of Shleining, and then the head of the beis din in Neizetz. As the Chasam Sofer predicted, if one studies Torah with hasmadah, he will have siyata dishmaya, and he can succeed.

Reprinted from the Parshas Voeschanon 5780 email of Torah Wellsprings: Collected Thoughts from Rabbi Elimelech Biderman.

The Rosh Hayeshiva's Special Directive



Rav Aharon Kotler, z"tl, the Rosh Yeshivah of Lakewood, was preparing to travel to Eretz Yisroel for a visit. His Talmidim made preparations to accompany

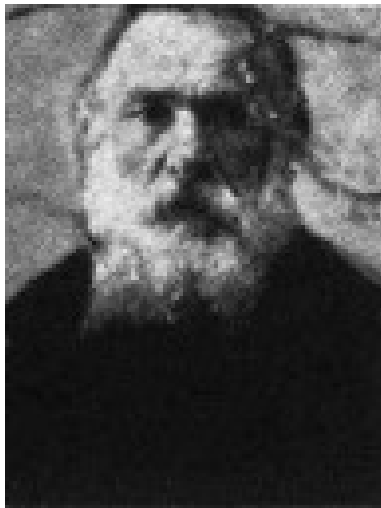
him and escort him to the airport, but when Reb Aharon found out about their plans, he told them that he preferred they remain in the Yeshivah and continue their learning.

The students were in a quandary about what to do because they loved their Rebbe and wished to see him off, but they did not want to upset him by not following his wishes.

They decided to ask Rav Moshe Feinstein, zt"l, for advice. Rav Moshe considered the question and answered, "Accompany the Rosh Yeshivah to the airport. Honoring Rav Aharon is like honoring the Torah itself!"

Reprinted from the Parshas Sh'lach 5780 email of Torah U'Tefilah as compiled by Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg.

The Alter of Navardok's Last Candle



The Alter of Navardok, zt"l, Rav Yosef Yoizel Horowitz (1847-1919), was once sitting in a cabin in the woods learning Torah at night. His only source of light was his last candle which was almost at its end.

Rav Yosef Yoizel was worried that he would be forced to stop learning, but he strengthened himself with thoughts of Bitachon, faith in Hashem. He had strong trust that Hashem could provide a solution for him, even in his isolated location.

He walked to the front of the cabin, opened the door, and was startled to see

someone approaching him from the woods. The stranger handed him a candle and then disappeared into the woods.

Rav Yosef Yoizel, never discovered the identity of the stranger. He viewed the miracle as a reminder.

Reprinted from the Parshas Sh'lach 5780 email of Torah U'Tefilah as compiled by Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg.

The Tragic Petirah of the Silver Candelabrum



There is a very famous Mashal that was said by the Dubna Maggid: A man once asked his neighbor if he could borrow a spoon. The neighbor agreed, and the next day the man returned two spoons.

“But I only lent you one spoon,” the surprised neighbor said.

“True,” the borrower answered, “but while your spoon was with us it gave birth to another spoon.”

The neighbor gave his friend a surprised look, but made no protest.

The next day the man was back again, this time asking to borrow a pot. When he returned the pot, there was another smaller pot inside.

When the man wanted to borrow a silver candelabrum, the neighbor did not hesitate to lend it. However, when a few days passed and his candelabrum had not been returned, the neighbor began to get nervous. “Can I please have my candelabrum back?” he asked.

“I’m sorry but it died,” the man answered.

“Died! How can a candelabrum die?”

“Well, if you believed that a spoon and a pot can give birth, why can’t a candelabrum die?”

Reprinted from the Parshat Va’eschanan-Nachamu 5780 email of Eitz Hachaim.

Survival Basics



The Klausenberger Rebbe and U.S. Five Star General Dwight D. Eisenhower

There's a famous story that Rabbi Shlomo Diamond told us about the time that General Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890-1969) visited the displacement camps after the United States liberated the Jews from the concentration camps.

He saw the Jewish people suffering from disease and malnutrition and asked them, "Please tell me, what can the U.S. government get for you? Please tell me what you need!"

The Klausenberger Rebbe's Request

The Klausenberger Rebbe (Rabbi Yekusiel Yehuda Halberstam, 1905-1994) was the people's spokesman and said, "It's getting close to the time of our holiday of *Succot*, can you please get us *lulavim* and *etrogim*, so we can do our *mitzvah*?"

The general was shocked at this request. He thought that they would ask for food, clothing, or other basics to make them more comfortable. But a Jew needs his *mitzvot* to survive in this world! That's what connects us to Hashem, which is the true life-source of all Jews.

Reprinted from the Parashat Hukat 5780 email of Rabbi Amram Sananes as written by Jack E. Rahmey.

Story #1181

The Miracle of the Yellow Pages Rabbi

By Shlomo Schwartz
From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles
editor@ascentofsafed.com



Rabbi Shlomo Schwartz, z"l

In the mid-1990's, before cell phones, Facebook, or other social media, I relied on my answering machine and fax machine to conduct business. My phone number was listed in the Yellow Pages, and I'd get fifty to a hundred calls a day that I would screen and call back as my busy schedule would permit. Often, I would ask people to send me a fax with requests or questions. As luck would have it, The Chai Center came up as one of the first Jewish organizations in the Yellow Pages, which was great for business.

One evening, I was in my office, an upstairs wood-paneled room that runs the length of the house, lined with my entire library of Hebrew and English books. It was midnight, a cold, rainy winter night, and the phone rang twice before the call went to the answering machine - long enough to hear, short enough to ignore.

A voice started to record: "Hi, there. I got your name from the Yellow Pages, under synagogue. My name is Christina. My grandfather is dying and has been unconscious for ten days; he is on home hospice, and we need a rabbi.

Christina is not the most Jewish sounding name, I thought. This was intriguing enough to answer. I picked up the phone. Christina gave me a rundown again, and I told her I'd be right over.

I went to an unfamiliar neighborhood near Culver City, somewhat downscale and, from its vibe, not exactly little Jerusalem. As I approached the address, I saw an old RV in the driveway. Back then not many Jews took trips in RVs so it made me think this wasn't a very Jewish-identifying family.

As I went inside, I didn't see what I believed to be a single Jewish face except that of the man lying in the hospital bed. "This is my grandfather," one woman said. I saw an old man, unconscious, lying in bed and surrounded by a group of extended family, mostly Latino. It was 1 A.M., and the story began to unfold.

Sam, the elderly man, had worked for the U.S. Postal Service for nearly fifty years and lived in this neighborhood with his non-Jewish wife, Maria, all that time. Maria knew that Sam was Jewish and had asked Christina, the granddaughter, to call for a rabbi for a Jewish burial. The wife said he had cousins in Riverside, and one used to call Sam - Uncle Shimon. Good, he had a name!

I then asked what his father's name was. It was David. Perfect: Shimon ben David.

During my nineteen years working as a campus rabbi at UCLA, I also acted as a chaplain at UCLA Medical Center. I knew that when someone is close to dying, you need to get squarely into the person's face and speak loudly so that he or she can hear you. So, I told Maria and the dozen or so family members, people who may well have never seen a Jew other than Sam in their lives, that I was going to get in Sam's face and speak loudly, because when a person is in a coma or otherwise unconscious, you have to yell. They all nodded with silent approval.

I told them that I was going to call on his Jewish soul with his Hebrew name and chant a special prayer for the soul of Shimon ben David: Sam, son of David. I moved extremely close to Sam's bed and yelled into his ear the most important one-liner in the Jewish religion: "*Shma Yisrael, HaShem Elokeynu, HaShem Echod*" – "**Hear, Israel. G-D is our G-dG-D is One.**"

Sam, lying in bed with his eyes still closed, said in response, *Baruch shem kavod malchuso l'olam vaed*: **Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever.** They were the first words he had spoken since falling unconscious ten days earlier.

Total silence. I turned around and saw twelve heads leaning over me, listening intently. Suddenly, all the people in the room started yelling, "The rabbi made a miracle; the rabbi made a miracle!"

Finally, Maria thanked me for coming, but asked that I not return. "Rabbi, we'll call you when we need you."

I called every day for several days, and every day someone would answer the phone and quickly end the call. Finally, on the third day, I called, and once again Christina said she would call me and then hung up the phone.

But then, as soon as I hung up, Christina called me back to report that while I had been on the phone with her just moments earlier, Sam had passed away. It felt good to know that Sam died as I was on the phone thinking about him, one [Jewish] soul connected to another.

I was able to convince his wife, Maria, to have a kosher burial for Sam in a Jewish cemetery, telling her that he was born a Jew and should be buried as one. We gathered a *minyan* to help complete the Jewish funeral ceremony, men who stood up for Sam purely because it was a *mitzvah* to do so.

Shimon ben David left this world in the highest way.

Source: Extracted, re-titled and lightly edited by Yerachmiel Tilles from “*Love When that Happens*” -- copyrighted by **Rabbi Mendel Schwartz** (his son) in 2018.
Connection: Weekly Torah -- The *SHMA YISRAEL* prayer.

Biographical note: Rabbi Shlomo Schwartz [7 Kislev 5705 -12 Shvat 5777 (Nov. 12,1944 -“Feb. 7, 2017)] was a staff rabbi of the very first campus Chabad House in the world, in Berkeley (California) and then Los Angeles. In the 1980’s the widowed Schwartzie married Olivia, and in the same decade they opened *Chai Center*, independent of Chabad, to give full expression to his creative--and *wild*--ideas for adult education for every Jew that moves. Over the years he had a life-changing effect on thousands of Jews. **For the last two decades of his life, he was Ascent’s Summer Rabbi-Scholar in Residence accompanied by Olivia, of course.**

Reprinted from the Parashat Va’eschanan 5780 email of KabbalaOnline.org, a project of Ascent of Safed.