SLICE OF LIFE

Two Centuries Later

by Steve Hyatt

At some point in time, about 125 years ago, a relative of mine purchased a volume of *Mishnayot* published in Zurich, Switzerland in 1814. Printed in vivid colors and bound in a grand cover, it must have looked spectacular when it first rolled off the state-of-the-art Gutenberg Press.

What happened to the book for the first 125 years will probably forever remain a mystery to us. What we do know, however, is that at some point in his life, the book came into the possession of my great-uncle Ben. During his long lifetime, my great-uncle held myriad jobs, including working as a poultry farmer, a master mechanic and a sales person. Unfortunately life was difficult and challenging for Uncle Ben and he never pursued a life of Jewish study and scholarship. This family heirloom, that must have been studied by countless individuals over it's lifetime, was stored away in a dark, dusty closet in Uncle Ben's home.

Wars were fought, American presidents were elected, the state of Israel was established, children were born, young boys and girls had their bar and bat mitzvas, and all the while the book sat patiently in the dark gathering dust.

At the ripe old age of 89 Uncle Ben passed away, leaving behind his wife of 69 years and a modest home. My Uncle Mel and my dad lovingly assisted their aunt with pressing matters and eventually helped her find a beautiful place to live at a nearby assisted living community. When they went to her home to help her get her affairs in order they found the majestic old book in the back of the dark, dust-filled closet. Literally blowing the dust off the book, Dad carefully examined the pages of the ancient manuscript. Since it was printed entirely in Hebrew, it was not something he could decipher.

My great-aunt's medical condition precluded Dad from questioning her about the book so he carefully packed it up and sent it to me, telling me to speak with the local Chabad emissary to Northern Nevada in Reno, Rabbi Mendel Cunin.

When I first saw the book, I immediately thought it was a *Chumash*, the *Five Books of Moses*. But after a closer examination I realized it looked very much like the text we use in *shul* when we study the *Talmud*. Given the age of the book and its importance I looked forward to bringing it to the rabbi for a closer inspection.

A day later I received an e-mail from the Rabbi informing our small but growing congregation that someone's mother had passed away and he needed to say the *"Kaddish"* prayer. I took this opportunity to bring the book to the Chabad Center and show it to the rabbi before the start of the evening service.

Rabbi Cunin told me immediately that the book was a volume of Mishnayot published at least 191 years earlier. He pointed out that the pages were actually made from cloth, not paper, and that it was in remarkable shape for such an old manuscript.

A few minutes later the service began and we joined in to support our friend and neighbor in his time of need. Toward the end of the service the rabbi shared with us that it is a tradition to study from the Mishna when a member of a *minyan* is saying Kaddish.

Catching my eye the rabbi said, "Let's use the Mishnayot that Steve has brought with him tonight, a book that is over 191 years old." And with that he picked up the book written just a few years after the signing of the American Declaration of Independence and discussed a passage about searching for *chametz* before the start of Passover.

When Rabbi Cunin completed the portion of Mishnayot, he slowly closed the text and tenderly handed it back to me after which we concluded the service. The next morning we met again so our friend could once again say Kaddish. Before we started we talked about the book and how wonderful it was that after all these years in seclusion it once again was used as a source of learning and inspiration. The rabbi explained that the Hebrew letters comprising the word "Mishna" are the same letters that spell the word "*neshama*" – soul. He went on to say that both the Torah and the soul are eternal.

His words tore through me like an electric charge, for each letter, word, sentence, paragraph, and chapter of the Torah are indeed eternal. The words we read today are the exact words our people studied under Moses' tutelage in the Sinai desert. Handed down generation after generation these words that bring light to the world have never changed and never will. It is a constant that has united the Jewish people for centuries. And now, decades after it was first printed, and at least three decades after it was stored away in a dark, dusty storage closet, the words of wisdom once again had an opportunity to illuminate the minds and souls of a congregation in the "Biggest Little City in the World" – Reno, Nevada.

This exquisite book, has impacted many souls since a family member first acquired it so many years ago. It has passed from hand to hand, from relative to relative, it has been transported thousands and thousands of miles, it has resided in many different cities from Zurich all the way to Reno. And yet, more than 191 years after the ink first caressed the pages of this very special book, it arrived just in the nick of time to comfort a grieving son and his friends in a little shul in Reno, almost as if it had a pre-destined 191-year-old reservation to join a minyan of ten.

Coincidence? I think not!■

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New Centers

Chabad of Venice

A new Chabad Center will be opening soon in Venice, Florida, under the directorship of Rabbi Sholom Ber and Chaya Schmerling. The center will be serving this Southwest Florida Jewish community.

Chabad of Phuket

Last month Chabad of Phuket, on Phuket Island, opened. Their first event was a traditional Shabbat dinner for Jewish relief workers, Israeli backpackers, and Phuket residents. In addition to Friday night Shabbat services and dinners, Chabad of Phuket, under the auspices of Chabad of Thailand headquartered in Bangkok, is continuing its relief work on the island.

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