

Chaburah - A Pact of Brothers

By Dovid Sussman | APRIL 4, 2012

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In 1939, they were five bochurim learning together in the Novardok Yeshivah. In 1949, while rebuilding their war-shattered lives, they met again. Decades later, a series of marriages fused the lifelong friends into a single family unit.



In 1939, on the seventh of Shvat, five young men gathered in the halls of the Novardok Yeshivah for an occasion that was at once prosaic and momentous: to establish a chaburah.

Students in the Novardok Yeshivah often formed chaburos, small groups of yoonce every six months. Before writing to each other, they would learn 15 minutes of mussar on the subject of bein adam l'chaveiro. Every year, they would observe the seventh of Shvat, the anniversary of the group's formation, as a personal Yom Tov, when they would learn an additional hour of mussar, also on the subject of bein adam l'chaveiro, and write letters to the rest of the group. If the seventh of Shvat coincided with Shabbos, the letters would be written on the following day. They would also assist each other in any way possible, physically or financially, just as they would have done for actual brothers. If any member of the group moved, he would inform the others immediately of his new location. Finally, their ultimate goal was to settle together, eventually, in one place in Eretz Yisrael.

A few months after they signed their pact, World War II broke out.

Friends for Life

All five members of this close-knit group were highly motivated and accomplished yeshivah bochurim. Most of them had been studying in Novardok for over ten years. Since they had been away from home for years, in essence, they had nothing but each other.

Shloma Margolis, whose father had passed away when he was only 12 years old, had left his impoverished family behind to learn in the great yeshivos of the day. By 1939, he had spent about ten years in the Novardok educational system.

Moshe Plotnik, who had been close friends with Shloma Margolis since the age of 13, was also a seasoned yeshivah student.

Yisrael Zev (Velvel) Zoimen, a graduate of Reb Elchonon Wasserman's yeshivah in Baranovich, was an incredible masmid and had learned under Rav Elazar Menachem Shach ztz"l, who was then a member of the Novardok Yeshivah faculty. A glowing letter of recommendation from Rav Shach was found in Rabbi Zoimen's personal effects after he passed away; in his characteristic humility, Rabbi Zoimen had never revealed the existence of the letter even to his own family.

The other two bochurim were Avraham Shmuel Cherniv HaKohein and Shlomo Podolsky, who was about to depart for Eretz Yisrael. During the seudas preidah for Shlomo Podolsky, he suggested the formation of the chaburah, which the others agreed to at once.

According to their family members, Sheves Achim was far more than a simple pact of friendship. "The underlying motive," asserts Mrs. Brenda Willner, the daughter of Rabbi Shloma Margolis, "was to be mechazeik each other to shteig in ruchniyus. It's true that they were also there for each other in a physical sense, but their primary purpose was to strengthen each other spiritually. Whenever they spoke or wrote to each other, they would tell each other vertlach and discuss Torah. By establishing this brotherhood, they hoped to remain a source of chizuk for each other in spiritual matters throughout the years. And they understood that if you have a good idea, if you don't make it practical by taking action, it won't be lasting."

Avrumi Moskovitz, a grandson of Rabbi Margolis, adds, "I once told a newly minted baal teshuvah about Sheves Achim and his reaction was, 'You mean that their friendship wasn't just based on sports and other types of camaraderie? That's incredible!' And he was right; it was based on much higher ideals."

Rabbi Henschel Plotnik of Chicago, a son of Rabbi Moshe Plotnik, adds another possible motivation for the group's establishment. "The war was only a few months away at the time. It's likely that they had a sense of impending doom and foresaw the possibility that they might lose their families during the war. The Sheves Achim chaburah merged them into another family of sorts, which gave them invaluable support and brotherly aid in their times of need."

Prisoners in the Taiga

Rabbi Plotnik and Rabbi Margolis refused to accept Soviet citizenship, and instead applied to the NKVD for transit visas. A while later they were summoned separately to a police station for interrogation, where they were grilled about why they had refused to accept Russian citizenship. After being forced to sign a statement, they were warned not to discuss their interrogation with anyone; the penalty for revealing that information would be a five-year prison term.

The Soviet authorities continued to promise that the refugees would be permitted to leave the country. But the great Rav Elchonon Wasserman Hy”d foresaw otherwise. “Their mouths speak vanity, and their right hand is the right hand of falsehood,” he warned the bochurim, quoting a pasuk in Tehillim. The great sage’s analysis of the situation turned out to be all too accurate.

On Friday night, June 13, 1941, Rabbi Margolis and Rabbi Plotnik were awakened in the middle of the night in their shared quarters in Vilkomir by the sounds of mass arrests being carried out in the street below. Armed soldiers entered their apartment and ordered them to pack their belongings. They were taken by truck to a train station, where they were ordered into a boxcar. The train sat in the station for a few days. The only food and water given to the tightly packed people was provided by generous civilians who witnessed their plight. In the middle of the week, the train finally pulled out of the station and embarked on the first leg of a lengthy journey.

For several weeks Rabbi Plotnik, Rabbi Margolis, and their fellow passengers were kept confined in the tiny boxcar, subsisting on meager quantities of food and water, until they reached a Siberian prison camp. On arrival, the prisoners’ belongings were inspected and anything of value was confiscated. The guards issued receipts for their valuables, but the prisoners knew that they would never see their possessions again.

The Russian guards mocked the Jewish deportees for having talleisim and tefillin in their possession. One of them seized Rabbi Plotnik’s tefillin and threw them away, but Rabbi Plotnik risked his life to retrieve them when the guard wasn’t looking. In a journal he wrote after the war, Rabbi Plotnik recalled, “My greatest joy was that I saved my tefillin. The reason was two-fold: first, I was able to perform the mitzvah of tefillin daily. Second, I prevented the chillul Hashem of ridicule of a sacred object. The raucous laughter of the ignorant soldiers reminded me of the auto-da-fe of the Spanish Inquisition.”

Rabbi Margolis succeeded in keeping his tefillin, as well. The two friends also managed to remain together in the barracks and on the grueling forced labor brigades, where they chopped wood from dawn until dusk, a type of menial labor for which they were ill-suited.

But even in the depths of their misery, Hashem's kindness was still apparent. Rabbi Margolis relates that a couple of Lithuanian Jewish prisoners who worked in the kitchen would endanger their lives to provide them with extra food. Rabbi Plotnik writes that a Jewish prisoner who had been in the camp for four years promised to help them find the easiest possible jobs. These were the "angels" that Hashem sent to them in the darkness of their Siberian exile.

After four months, all the Polish citizens, including Rabbi Margolis and Rabbi Plotnik, were unexpectedly released from the slave labor camp. They traveled to Kazakhstan, where they spent the remainder of the war years in a kolkhoz, a Soviet collective village where, in Rabbi Margolis's words, "you labored for your daily bread with no assurance of a livelihood."

Even in the kolkhoz, their religious freedom was not assured. Rabbi Margolis recounts they were part of a group of ten yeshivah students and occasionally they received packages of food from the Vaad Hatzalah in New York. These packages aroused the envy of their gentile neighbors, who slandered Rabbi Margolis to the NKVD, claiming that he was appropriating food that was actually meant for them. Miraculously, their slanderous letter was intercepted by a police chief who was sympathetic to Rabbi Margolis. The accusations died on the officer's desk.

There is evidence that the Sheves Achim pact was maintained even during this difficult period. Chaim Zoimen, a grandson of Reb Velvel Zoimen, relates that among his grandfather's papers, the family found letters that Rabbi Plotnik and Rabbi Margolis had sent to him in Japan and Shanghai. Clearly, he points out, the letters sent by his faithful friends must have had great sentimental value.

From Friends to Brothers

During the Kazakhstan years, Rabbi Margolis married Chava Rivka Dovek, an orphan who had been displaced from her home along with her sister Ruta and two brothers. The young couple agreed that Mrs. Margolis's three siblings would accompany them on their travels, as would Rabbi Margolis's old friend, Rabbi Moshe Plotnik. In fact, Rabbi Plotnik lodged in their home.

At the end of the war, the Allied forces insisted that the Soviet Union allow all Polish citizens to be repatriated to Poland. This decree allowed Rabbi and Mrs. Margolis, Rabbi Plotnik, and the Doveks to make their way to Lodz, the postwar center of Jewish life in Poland. Rabbi Margolis, who had established two Novardok branches before the war, once again followed the teachings of Novardok and founded a new yeshivah in Lodz. It was also in Lodz that Rabbi Margolis arranged a shidduch for Rabbi Plotnik with none other than his wife's sister, Ruta Dovek; the two close friends were now bound together as a single family. The wedding was as simple and rudimentary as could be expected for that turbulent period, Rabbi Henschel Plotnik relates. His mother spent the entire day of her own wedding cooking the chickens for the wedding feast. An hour before the chuppah she finally stopped, at her sister's behest, and went to wash up.

While they hoped to fulfill the Sheves Achim pact and settle in Eretz Yisrael, Rabbi Margolis, Rabbi Plotnik, and their wives eventually succeeded in obtaining visas to enter the United States. On their arrival on American soil, they were greeted by their old friend and Sheves Achim comrade, Rabbi Velvel Zoimen. Rabbi Zoimen had made his way from Shanghai to San Francisco after the war and had then traveled across the continent to join his uncle in New York. He arranged apartments for the new arrivals in Seagate, but before long their paths parted once again. Rabbi Zoimen moved to Chicago, where he became a shochet. Rabbi Plotnik eventually decided to relocate to Malden, Massachusetts (part of the greater Boston area), and Rabbi Margolis joined him.

Renewing the Covenant

In 1949, halfway across the globe, Rabbi Shlomo Podolsky and his family were plunged into a serious crisis. One of Rabbi Podolsky's children had been diagnosed with a brain tumor, and the specialists in Eretz Yisrael were unable to treat it. They suggested that he travel to the United States to seek medical treatment at the Children's Hospital in Boston, a prestigious facility where the young girl would receive the best possible care. Fortunately, Hashem had already prepared the perfect hosts for him – Rabbi Plotnik and Rabbi Margolis, with whom he had retained contact by mail throughout the years.

The chaburah took advantage of the opportunity to meet and renew their pact, ten years after the chaburah's formation.

“It seems that the original chaburah reconvened in 1949,” Avrumi Moskovitz relates. “The new agreement added some more stipulations. Each member pledged to learn Gemara, halachah, and mussar every day. They also agreed to observe the seventh of Shvat as a day of remembrance for their fallen chaver, Avraham Cherniv, and for someone else named Reb Gedaliah ben Reb Pesach. We assume that this refers to Rav Gedaliah Peslin, the mashgiach of the Novardok Yeshivah.”

For many years after that, the Sheves Achim chaburah continued to correspond and speak regularly. “Even the ladies became friendly with each other and wrote to each other often,” relates Mrs. Ruta Plotnik, the almanah of Rabbi Moshe Plotnik. The large photograph of the original Sheves Achim chaburah that graces her dining room wall attests to the close connection that the members of the group felt with each other. They were like family in every sense.

Bringing Yiddishkeit to Massachusetts

One of Rabbi Moshe Plotnik's first positions in America was as a shochet. He gave up that source of parnassah due to his mistrust of the rav hamachshir under whom he worked. "He suspected that the rav wasn't really competent," Rabbi Henschel Plotnik relates, "and he intentionally put a nick in his shechitah knife in order to test him. When the rav missed it, my father decided that he couldn't remain in that position any longer. He moved to Boston and became a mohel."

Once, his children relate, he walked three miles on Yom Kippur to examine a baby who had had a bris the day before. For irreligious clients, who might have been tempted to have the milah performed by a doctor instead of a qualified mohel, Rabbi Plotnik often hired a nurse to assuage their fears, even though the nurse's fee left him with nearly no compensation for his work.

The arrival of the Plotnik and Margolis families brought an infusion of spirituality to Boston, which had few bnei Torah at the time. In addition to practicing milah, Rabbi Plotnik became the shamash of the Agudas Yisrael shul in Boston. His actual responsibilities far exceeded the scope of his title. With his great erudition, Rabbi Plotnik was often called on to perform many of the responsibilities of an actual rav, and he became a de facto spiritual leader in the community.

Rabbi Margolis was eventually appointed the rav of the Chayei Adam shul in Boston's Brookline neighborhood, despite his poor English and lack of familiarity with American culture. "The people valued him because he spoke to their hearts," Mrs. Willner remarks.

"He was a master of kiruv before it was even a word," adds Avrumi Moskovitz. "He took the ideals of Novardok with him wherever he went. In Novardok, they had learned not to care about what other people thought. The bochurim would go from town to town to open yeshivos. They would come to a shul and get up to speak, only to be chased out by the leftists in town. But they wouldn't be deterred; they would simply move on to their next destination. My grandfather brought that steely determination with him to America and continued to teach what was right, regardless of what other people thought."

Rabbi Margolis's children describe him as "a piece of mussar." He was extremely calculated, and also very reticent. His observance of the Torah's mitzvos was always preceded by careful preparation. "My father used to say that there is no such thing as coming early to shul," Mrs. Willner relates. "You're either late or on time. Even if you get there two hours before davening begins, it means that you have time to prepare for davening. He understood that you don't just 'fall in' to Shabbos or to davening, that these things need preparation."

Interestingly, many of these traits were mirrored by Reb Velvel Zoimen, who spent most of his life in Chicago but still remained in constant contact with his Sheves Achim "brothers." "When Reb Velvel Zoimen passed away, we went to the levayah," Mrs. Willner relates, "and many of the things they were saying about him could easily have described my father as well. The two had very different personalities, but when it came to mussar and mitzvos, they were very much alike."

Family Ties

In 1959, Rabbi Shlomo Podolsky was stricken with a dreaded disease. Once again, he made the trip from Eretz Yisrael to America, this time to Sloan-Kettering Hospital in Manhattan. Rabbis Margolis and Plotnik, ever the devoted friends, flew to New York to the bedside of their old friend. "My uncle, Rabbi Plotnik, had never been on a plane before and was terrified of flying," Mrs. Willner recalls, "but he went anyway."

The illness ultimately took Rabbi Podolsky's life, but the other members of the group maintained their allegiance to him long after his death. Rabbi Podolsky had founded an institution in Eretz Yisrael, Toras Moshe in Tel Aviv, that served as both an orphanage and a yeshivah for orphaned students, and the rest of the Sheves Achim kept it financially afloat for years after his death. The group also maintained a steady correspondence with Rabbi Podolsky's widow, Rebbetzin Esther, to provide her with consolation and encouragement. Several years later, the Sheves Achim bond deepened even further when a daughter of Rabbi Margolis and a son of Rabbi Podolsky were married.

In 1966, Rabbi Plotnik passed away, leaving only Rabbi Margolis and Rabbi Zoimen to keep up the Sheves Achim ritual.

Rabbi Margolis moved to Eretz Yisrael in 1991 and settled in Bnei Brak. Even in his old age, his tireless dedication to learning and disseminating Torah continued. During these years he authored his two-volume sefer, Darkei Hashleimus, and founded a yeshivah in Kiryat Sefer by the same name. But his primary occupation was learning. He joined a kollel and learned alongside yungeleit a third of his age, until his passing a few months ago.

Rabbi Zoimen also returned to kollel at an advanced age. He remained a kollel yungerman for the rest of his life, first in Chicago and then in New York, where he moved in his later years to be in proximity to his children. He passed away in the beginning of 2011.

Until their final years, Rabbi Margolis and Rabbi Zoimen continued adhering to the terms of their agreement and remained in constant contact. Even in the final year of Rabbi Zoimen's life, when he was too sick to correspond, Rabbi Margolis fulfilled his side of the agreement and penned letters to his longtime friend. "This past year, when Rabbi Zoimen was no longer with us, was the first time since 1939 that no one was able to keep up the Sheves Achim correspondence," Mrs. Willner says.

But in yet another incredible twist of Hashgachah, the circle of relationships was completed a few years ago when one of Mrs. Willner's daughters married Chaim Zoimen, a grandson of Reb Velvel Zoimen. All four members of the group that survived World War II were now related by marriage, their families and descendants eternally bound by ties of blood. "They called it the Sheves Achim, and ultimately my father became a legal 'ach' [brother], to each of his friends," Mrs. Willner comments.

"When we got married," Chaim Zoimen relates, "everyone was commenting that it was very bashert. I was a bit puzzled about why everyone was making such a big deal out of it, but a rebbi of mine told me, 'If you understood what a Novardok chaburah was, you would be very impressed.'

After decades of tireless avodah and ironclad commitment to their ideals and to each other, the legacy of the Sheves Achim was finally cemented for all generations. The four families had become inextricably intertwined.

Brothers Until the End

Sheves Achim was such a noteworthy brotherhood that, over the years, other illustrious individuals sought to be accepted as members. Among them were Rabbi Gedaliah Peslin, the renowned mashgiach of the Novardok Yeshivah; Rabbi Mordechai Savitsky, a prominent ilui and talmid chacham in Boston who was a close friend of Rabbi Margolis and Rabbi Plotnik; and Rabbi Savitsky's brother-in-law, Rabbi Poupko, a leader of Agudath Israel. While Rabbi Margolis writes in his appendix to Darkei Hashleimus that they were, indeed, admitted to the group, the families relate that the Sheves Achim phenomenon was primarily limited to the group's original members.

"They set a goal, and they kept their focus on that goal," says Mrs. Willner, who comments that the essence of the Sheves Achim was its members' constancy and consistency. "It was an organization designed to keep them growing, because they knew that the best way to grow was with the constant encouragement and support of their chaveirim."

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