

The Jewish Weekly

The Genuine Royal Signature

By Rabbi Yerachmiel Tilles

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.

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.

Rabbi 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.

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, Rabbi Greenberg didn't know where he would get the money. "But he figured if they didn't get anywhere with the authorities, there would be nothing to pay for. And if it came to the point where G-d found a way for them to transport him to Israel, G-d would also find a way for them to pay for it."

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 shlichim - we don't take no for an answer," Rabbi 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.

Now that they were beginning to see movement, Rabbi 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.

It Once Happened...

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," Rabbi 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," Rabbi 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.


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.

"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."

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Shabbat Times - Parshat Eikev

| | Candle Lighting | Motzei Shabbat | Motzei Shabbat ר"ת |
|--|-----------------|----------------|--------------------|
|  Jerusalem | 7:02 | 8:17 | 8:54 |
| Tel Aviv | 7:17 | 8:19 | |
| Haifa | 7:10 | 8:20 | |
| Be'er Sheva | 7:18 | 8:18 | |



Three Difficult Conditions By Rabbi Yerachmiel Tilles

The Belzer Rebbe, Rabbi Aharon Rokeach, arrived in the Holy Land in 1944, after indescribable suffering under Nazi rule and pursuit. His escape from war-torn Europe was miraculous, a story in itself. But here at last he could be free, and able to worship in his sacred manner.

A home was purchased for him in Tel Aviv, where he wanted to live, but until it was ready he had to stay in Jerusalem, where a typical dwelling for a large family consisted of two rooms, with bathrooms shared by other tenants. The Rebbe's attendants conducted a two week, fruitless search for more suitable accommodations.

Then they heard about a Chabad couple that lived in a four-room apartment, a rarity in those days. Who owned it? A Lubavitcher couple, Schneur Zalman and Kaila Ashkenazi. When Schneur Zalman decided to move to the Holy Land before WWII, his wealthy son Yehoshua went to Jerusalem to find an apartment. Wanting to create something a bit more respectable for his father, he purchased two apartments with a shared bathroom, and connected the two.

Belzer Chassidim approached Ashkenazi, asking if their Rebbe could stay there.

"How many rooms does the Rebbe need?" Ashkenazi asked.

"Three," he was told. One for prayers, one for sleeping, and one to receive visitors.

Schneur Zalman and his wife agreed, and during those seven weeks while they hosted the Belzer Rebbe, made do with one room for themselves. They even provided the Rebbe with meals, subsidizing everything, including food for the Rebbe's attendants.

Throughout this time, Schneur Zalman continued his own daily Chabad schedule. He interacted little with his illustrious guest and paid little attention to the comings and goings in the other three rooms. This suited the Belzer Rebbe, an intensely private person, just fine.

On 11 Nissan, the Belzer Rebbe's home in Tel Aviv was ready. Before departing he thanked his host, and also commented, "Leaving is very difficult, since I can smell the fear of G-d in your home."

Schneur Zalman mentioned his son, Rabbi Meir Ashkenazi, the Chief Rabbi of Shanghai, which had become a wartime refuge for so many desperate Jews. Because of the war father and son had been out of contact for several years.

"Will I ever see him again?" he wondered aloud. He knew that Meir was not in good health. Tearfully he asked the Belzer Rebbe for a blessing for his son.

The Belzer Rebbe gazed at him. "When your son arrives in Eretz Yisrael, I want him to come visit me."

Schneur Zalman Ashkenazi understood that this response included the answer to his question.

In 5710/1950, Rabbi Meir Ashkenazi finally arrived from Shanghai - partially debilitated by a stroke, along with years of travel and hardship. After a joyful reunion with his father, he was told about the blessing of the

Belzer Rebbe, and that he wished to see him. Rabbi Meir promptly left for Tel Aviv.

His son, Rabbi Moshe Ashkenazi, who lived in Tel Aviv, accompanied him to the Rebbe's home. While others waited outside with a kvittel (a personal note that a chassid brings to his Rebbe), Rabbi Meir was shown VIP treatment, and invited to immediately enter into the Rebbe's room.

The Rebbe warmly greeted him. Then he asked, "Perhaps you need a blessing for something."

Rabbi Meir nodded. He pointed to one of his eyes and explained his medical problem, a result of the stroke, and a problem that was worsening. The Belzer Rebbe strode forward, glanced at his eye, and declared, "You will be healed, but under three conditions: One, you must not eat any dairy foods.

Two, you must not listen to music."

He paused before the final condition. "Three, you must not visit the graves of tzaddikim."

Shortly later, on 10 Shevat, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson - the Rebbe Rayatz - passed away. Over the years Rabbi Meir had developed a devoted, personal relationship with the Rebbe. The latter had even arranged a marriage for one of Rabbi Meir's children. The loss was enormously felt.

Nevertheless, hearing about the Rebbe's son-in-law, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Rabbi Meir announced to the elder Chassidim, "There is a Rebbe!" Towards the end of the thirty-day mourning period for the Rayatz, he decided to go to 770.

Rabbi Meir approached the "RaMaSH" (as he was known then) in his office, with a pidyon nefesh - a "soul-redemption" hand-written note with the customary request for blessings. It also included a request for advice on a particular matter, which he felt only a Rebbe could give.

The Rebbe-to-be glanced at the paper and modestly declined conduct that he felt befitted an actual Rebbe. "You must go to the Ohel, my father-in-law's gravesite in Queens, with your pidyon."

"Oh no, I can't!" Rabbi Meir gasped. "I can't go there."

The Rebbe gazed at him with astonishment.

Rabbi Meir explained what had happened during his visit to the Belzer Rebbe and the three prohibitions. "Not going to graves of tzaddikim is an indispensable part of my cure," he concluded.

The Rebbe nodded. "If the Belzer Rebbe told you not to go, then you really cannot."

Then he sternly added, "But given that he is not your Rebbe, why didn't you ask him for the source of this instruction?"

Sighing, he put on his jacket, took his gartel (thin, black prayer sash) out of one of the pockets and tied it around his waist. Then he extended his hand and took the pidyon nefesh from Rabbi Meir Ashkenazi, the first one he ever accepted. Afterwards, he greeted a few more visitors, who had seen or heard what had just transpired, and accepted each one's personal note, without directing them to the gravesite of his holy father-in-law.

Thus, it may be said that the process leading to the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe's acceptance of his majestic role on Yud Shvat 5711 (Jan. 1951), started all the way back on 11 Nissan 5704 (1944) with the request of the Belzer Rebbe to Shneur Zalman Askenazi.

'A chip off the old block' is an English saying which is taken from the haftorah of Parshat Eikev. There, the prophet Isaiah declares *הביטו אל צור חוצבתם* - look to the rock from which you were hewn, *הביטו אל אברהם אביכם ואל שרה תהוללכם* - look to Avraham your father and Sarah who gave birth to you.

So here we as a nation are being encouraged to consider ourselves as being little stones, taken from that original huge rock: the founders of our faith, Avraham and Sarah. We are called upon to emulate them, to follow their ways of loving kindness, of absolute dedication to the word of Hashem and also to a burning desire to guarantee that their tradition would be passed on faithfully through to the generations to come.

The Hebrew word *אבן* - stone, is a composite term made up of two words, *אב* - father and *בן* - son. In the same way as a stone is indestructible in the face of natural elements, so too our tradition is indestructible when it is faithfully passed on from parents to children through the generations.

This was the dream of Avraham and Sarah; they desperately wanted a child, and through that child they wanted to convey and preserve the beauty of their faith that they were privileged to have. In striving to be chips off the old block, let us too guarantee that we walk in their ways to be filled with great *אמונה* - faith in G-d, wonderful and outstanding compassion towards others and a total commitment to guarantee that our wonderful Jewish tradition, through us, will be preserved for all time.

Another Torah I heard: A Jew is yearning to return to Jerusalem, the holy city. Yet so many Jewish people are brokenhearted. So many of us are in scattered pieces. How could we not be? We are so deeply immersed in an un-Jewish world and no one has taught us how to be. Sometimes it hurts so much. We don't know how to be the friend that we want to be.

The whole world is telling you that numbers are important. How much are you making? What's in the account? What will it produce? What's the bottom line? Sure, we all have to live. But why are we living? What are we living for? Amalek says that everything is ordinary. There is nothing special here. All you have is your bank account and your possessions. Yet since before creation Hashem has prepared for us the lights to illuminate our lives. The sun, moon and stars were created to light up the skies. Shabbat and the Torah were created to light up our lives.

Hashem put us Jews here in this world to be soul doctors. And the deepest healing comes from joy. The work that each of us has to do is to find the ways that bring us closer to Hashem. The ways that brings us into the joyous light of Hashem's love, so that we can know that Hashem is taking care of us each moment and giving us exactly what we need. This is the knowing that is beyond all knowing.

So may Hashem bless us to be closer to Him and let's pray with all our hearts, for our soldiers and healthcare professionals, and Chevra Kadisha members worldwide, and for those who need healing, shidduchim, children and parnassah and may we be blessed to have the most awesome, gorgeous, beautiful, peaceful, healthy, amazing, relaxed, spiritual, loving and sweet Shabbat.

Yossi

תורת עקב

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The Jewish Weekly's
PARSHA FACTS

NUMBER OF MITZVOT: 8
MITZVOT ASEH: 6
MITZVOT LO TAASEH: 2

NUMBER OF PESUKIM: 111
NUMBER OF WORDS: 1747
NUMBER OF LETTERS: 6865

HAFTORA:
Yeshayahu 49:14- 51:3 (ותאמר ציון). (this is the second of seven Haftorot, [the Seven Haftorot of Consolation] that precede Rosh Hashanah.)

This week we study Chapter 4 of Pirkei Avot

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