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WHEN A MEMPHIAN THRIVED IN HEBRON: THE LETTERS OF AHARON DOVID SHAINBERG (1906-1929)

The 18th of Av marks the *Yahrtzeit* of the 67 Jews¹ who were murdered by Arab mobs in Hebron on a fateful Shabbat in 5689 (August 23-24, 1929). Twenty five of those martyred Jews were students of Hebron's Yeshivat Knesset Yisrael.²

The famed Slabodka Yeshiva – located just outside of Kovna, Lithuania – was renamed Yeshivat Knesset Yisrael in 1897. It was founded in 1882 by Rabbi Nathan Tzvi Finkel (1849-1927), also known as “the Alter (Elder) of Slabodka.” It grew into one of the foremost Mussar Yeshivot of its time, and its well-known graduates established, led, and taught at many of the most renowned Yeshivot in the United States and Israel. In 1924, the Lithuanian government appeared ready to draft many of the Yeshiva's students into its army. In response, the heads of the Slabodka Yeshiva – Rabbi Finkel and Rabbi Moshe Mordechai Epstein (1866-1933) – decided to relocate much of the Yeshiva to Israel (then known as “the British Mandate of Palestine”). Hebron was chosen as the site for this new branch of Yeshivat Knesset Yisrael.³

There were nearly two dozen American / English students learning at the Yeshiva in Hebron by 1929, and several of them were among those wounded and killed during the massacre. Not long after relocating to Tennessee in the summer of 2016, I learned that among the Yeshiva's victims was a brilliant young native of Memphis named Aharon Dovid Shainberg, hy”d.⁴ Two of his nieces, Mrs. Joan Baum and Mrs. Diane Wruble, spent time meeting with me and described how their “Uncle

¹ As per *Encyclopedia Judaica* Vol. 8, 748.

² See *Encyclopedia Judaica's* entry for the “Slobodka Yeshiva,” Vol. 18, 674.

³ For more information, see *Encyclopedia Judaica's* entry for the “Slobodka Yeshiva,” Vol. 18, 674.

⁴ Acronym for *Hashem Yikom Damo* (may God avenge his blood), the traditional Hebrew honorific used for Jewish martyrs.

Dave” had a large extended family who revered his memory.⁵ They showed me pictures of their beloved uncle, and entrusted me with copies of many of the hand-written letters Dave Shainberg had mailed home to his family while studying in Hebron in 1928-1929.

I quickly realized those letters contained historic treasures that would interest an audience much larger than the extended Shainberg family. Therefore, over the course of several weeks during the summer of 2018, I deciphered, transcribed, and annotated Dave’s letters.⁶

The 18th of Av, 5779 (August 18-19, 2019) will mark 90 years since the Hebron massacre. In commemoration of their Uncle Dave’s 90th *Yahrzeit*, his loving family agreed to share excerpts from six of the letters which Dave Shainberg wrote and sent home while studying Hebron.⁷

Aharon Dovid ben Shlomo was cut down in the prime of his life. His letters paint a vivid picture of a spiritually driven, learned, hard working, focused, humorous, and caring twenty-three-year-old Yeshiva student. One cannot help but imagine what Dave Shainberg would have accomplished for himself and the Jewish people had he survived that terrible day in Hebron. May his soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life.

10/5/28 Thursday, Chol Hamo’ed Sukkos

Dear Folks,⁸

No, I am not sea-sick, only it is Chol Hamo’ed and in writing the law is that you must make an unusual change, hence the above slant.⁹

⁵ For example, in 1985, the Leach branch of the family (Ben & Beatrice Leach, Jack Leach, Dr. Larry & Diane Wruble, Phillip & Joan Baum, and George & Alyne Matz) dedicated the campus of the Memphis Hebrew Academy (MHA) in memory of their Uncle Dave. (The school was renamed the Margolin Hebrew Academy in 1991.)

⁶ While working on those letters, I reached out to numerous people who graciously helped me connect dots, fill in blanks, and identify personalities whom Dave had mentioned in passing. I thank (in alphabetical order): Joan Baum, Phillip Baum, Rebbitzin Dr. Esther Farbstein, Rabbi Joel Finkelstein, David Fleishhacker, Rabbi Chaim Gold, Gila Golder, Rabbi Nota Greenblatt, Rabbi Yaakov Greenblatt, Lisa Kaufman, Jill Notowich, Dr. Shaul Stampfer, Dr. Shlomo Tikochinski, Diane Wruble, and Dr. Larry Wruble. I also thank my father Mr. U.H. Males for his invaluable editorial assistance.

⁷ In order to maintain the authenticity of these letters, these excerpts contain the same spellings and punctuation as in Dave’s original letters.

⁸ More information on Dave’s parents – Sam (1882-1956) and Elizabeth (1878-1947) Shainberg – can be found online at: <http://www.jhsmem.org/bio/SamShainberg.pdf>

⁹ The words “Dear Folks” were written in an obvious downward slant. For the halakhic background to this issue, see *Shulhan Arukh Orach Hayyim* 544:1 and 5, and *Mishna Berura* ibid. 5 and 35.

TRADITION

At last I have reached my destination, Hebron.¹⁰ We left Tel Aviv Tuesday and after spending one day in Jerusalem we journeyed to Hebron, the home of the Yeshivath Kennesseth Israel. There were four in our party – a Mr. Mintz who is touring Palestine – comes from Newark, NJ – Mosheh Gold¹¹ the son of Rabbi Wolf Gold,¹² and his grandmother. Mosheh and I arranged for a room & board together in Hebron! After making all necessary arrangements I returned to Jerusalem today to get my trunk at the customs house. I was forced to spend the night here, since when I arrived at 2 o'clock in the afternoon the customs house was closed for the day. Most offices and a good many business establishments close at 1 o'clock. Oriental laziness!

Mr. Mintz and I have been inspecting the places of historical interest in Jerusalem. A visit to the “wailing wall”, the only remains of the ancient temple, was enough to break one's heart. There, close by the reeking odor of the narrow, dirty streets of the “old Jerusalem”, a Jew realizes that the glory of G-d has departed from Zion and that Israel is in the exile. And much more so especially at this time. I suppose you have read in the press of the terrible incident which happened on Yom Kippur: The English soldiers roughly attempted to tear down the curtain separating

¹⁰ In a letter dated 9/5/28, Dave wrote his parents from Brooklyn, NY, explaining what his planned trip to Hebron would consist of: sailing 5 days from NY to Cherbourg, France aboard the R.M.S. Aquitania (Rosh ha-Shana spent on the ship), travelling by train from Cherbourg to Paris, journeying by train from Paris to Trieste, Italy, sailing from Trieste to Alexandria, Egypt, and finally, sailing from Alexandria to Jaffa, Palestine – arriving in time for Sukkot.

¹¹ Fortunately, Mosheh Gold survived the Hebron massacre. His son, Rabbi Chaim Gold, is a highly regarded Jewish educator living in Kew Gardens Hills, NY.

¹² Rabbi Wolf (Zev) Gold (1889-1956) helped establish Yeshiva Torah Vodaath in Brooklyn, NY, was extremely active in the World Mizrachi Movement, and was one of the signatories of the Israeli declaration of independence. Dave did not explain how he became acquainted with Rabbi Gold. However, when I spoke to his grandson – Rabbi Chaim Gold – he confirmed that Rabbi Wolf Gold's brother was Rabbi Dr. Henry Raphael Gold, who served as a rabbi at Memphis' Baron Hirsch Congregation from 1916-19. It seems logical to conclude that Rabbi Dr. Raphael Gold maintained a friendship with the Shainberg family from his days in Memphis, and introduced Dave to his brother – Rabbi Wolf Gold – when Dave was studying at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (later to become known as Yeshiva University) in New York City, NY, before Dave left for Hebron. In a letter Dave sent his parents from Brooklyn, NY, dated September 5, 1928, he wrote that it was Rabbi Wolf Gold who advanced him \$200 of the \$260 needed for passage from NY to Palestine. Dave also wrote in that letter that upon arriving in Israel, he planned to spend the first day of Sukkot with the Gold family in Tel Aviv. Dave wrote home on 9/27/28 telling his parents he had arrived in Tel Aviv and was staying with the Gold family. More information on Rabbi Gold can be found online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolf_Gold

the men worshippers from the women at the “wailing wall”. A riot ensued which resulted in a woman being wounded.¹³ Ever since, the Jews of entire Palestine have made sharp protests, have held demonstrations (one mass meeting in Tel Aviv brought out more than 10,000 people) and have held parades of protest.

So think of it! That the holiest & most sacred spot of the Jewish people is controlled by the heartless and brazen Esau! For the few feet remaining of our holy Temple we must regard the English soldiers as the “Baale Battim”¹⁴ – Oh! I tell you it is heart rending! Here in Jerusalem now the feeling runs high – there are near riots almost every day. The Jewish population is putting up a sharp fight & I think the result will be a happy one. At least we pray so! There is talk of buying the few feet of the Temple wall or of demanding it from the govt. as Jewish property.

The Yeshiva in Hebron also exceeds my expectations. The building is nice and the location is an ideal one! Hebron is situated on a high plateau between two mountains. The scenery is inspiring – the weather always pleasant & cool on account of the elevation. There is a sanitarium in the vicinity. The town is inhabited mostly by Arabs, but about 25 Jewish families settled down there after the Yeshiva moved there from Slabodka!

We secured a beautiful room – with an old couple – refined people & true Jewish aristocrats.¹⁵ We have a front room in full view of the magnificent panorama of rolling hills & mountains. We pay for room and three meals a day 8 pounds a month (\$40) – we could have rented a cheaper place, but I thought it inadvisable to do so. This is one of the only possessing the luxury of running water (and even then only one faucet!) and I am told that it is one of the few places where decent meals are served . . .

¹³ The JTA’s September 26, 1928 report of this incident can be found online at: <https://www.jta.org/1928/09/26/jewish-holidays/yom-kippur/british-police-interfere-with-jewish-worship-at-wailing-wall-yom-kippur>

¹⁴ i.e. the authoritative owners.

¹⁵ Dave is describing Rabbi and Mrs. Betzalel Samerik. Rabbi Samarik served as a highly-regarded educator in Riga, Latvia before he and his wife moved to Israel and settled in Hebron. During the Hebron massacre, Dave was murdered at the Samarik home – as was Rabbi Samarik and two other American Yeshiva students: Benjamin (Binyamin) Hurwitz of Brooklyn, NY and Harry (Tzvi) Froman of Chicago, IL. See page 124 in the memorial volume published by Dave’s fellow Hebron Yeshiva students in the summer of 1930 entitled “*Sefer Zikaron Le-Kedoshei Yeshivat Hevron Knesset Yisrael*.” See also Rabbi Shimon Yosef Meller, “*Nesikh Mamleket Ha-Torah*,” (Jerusalem, Israel, 2001), 79. (Rabbi Meller reports that somehow Rabbi Samarik’s wife survived the massacre.)

TRADITION

Rabbi Hagaon¹⁶ M.M. Epstein¹⁷ (Yichyeh)¹⁸ and Rabbi “Yehezkel”¹⁹ the heads of the Yeshiva faculty received me with open arms and with marked friendliness. They had previously received letters from Rabbi Kramer (Rabbi Hagaon’s Epstein’s brother-in-law)²⁰ and Rabbi Gold that I was coming.

All in all, I am extremely well pleased and satisfied. I can live comfortable on \$15.00 a week in Hebron with an occasional trip to Jerusalem and with enough money to pay two teachers, that for which \$25.00 did not suffice in New York. Please, Dad send me some money as soon as possible by check. I have borrowed money until that will arrive.

Yesterday, I visited Rabbi Stampfer’s²¹ father-in-law – Rabbi Hagaon P. Frank²² (Yichyeh) – I also met his father who happened to be visiting from Pesach [sic] Tikvah. They received me very hospitably, and invited me to stay at their home whenever I should visit Jerusalem. They rejoiced to receive personal regards from Rabbi & Mrs. Stampfer & Rabbi & Mrs. Sacks.²³ By the way, one of Rabbi Frank’s sons is also studying at

¹⁶ Hebrew for “genius.”

¹⁷ Rabbi Moshe Mordechai Epstein was born in the town of Bakst, in the Vilna district of Lithuania. He studied in the Volozhin yeshiva under Rabbi Haim Soloveitchik. In 1893, Rabbi N. Finkel invited Rabbi Epstein to become the rosh yeshiva of the famed Yeshiva he had established in Slabodka.

¹⁸ Hebrew for “May he live.”

¹⁹ Rabbi Yehezkel Sarna (1890-1969) was a close student of Rabbi Finkel, and was also a son-in-law of Rabbi M.M. Epstein. He was greatly involved in establishing the Slabodka Yeshiva’s branch in Hebron, and served as one of its heads. Following Rabbi M.M. Epstein’s passing, he led the Yeshiva and played a great role in re-establishing it in Jerusalem after the bloody riots of 1929.

²⁰ Rabbi Sheftel Kramer (d. 1942) came to America from the Yeshiva in Slutzk, Poland/Lithuania, to assist Rabbi Yehuda H. Levenberg (1884-1939) in leading the Yeshiva he established in 1923 in New Haven, CT.

²¹ Rabbi Elijah David Stampfer (1899-1962) served as the rabbi of Memphis’ Baron Hirsch Congregation from 1927-1930. Seventeen years later, he returned to Memphis to serve as the rabbi of Congregation Anshei Sphard for several years beginning in 1947. Mrs. Nehama Stampfer (1900-1937) was a daughter of Rabbi Tzvi Pesah and Rebbitzen Gitta Malka Frank of Jerusalem. (Dr. Shaul Stampfer of Jerusalem, Israel, is a grandson of the Rabbi and Mrs. Stampfer whose names appear throughout Dave’s letters.)

²² Rabbi Zvi Pesah Frank (1873-1960) was a towering rabbinic figure who served as the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem for more than three decades.

²³ Dave must be referring to Rabbi Menahem BenZion and Mrs. Hana Rivka Sacks. Mrs. Sacks (1895-1977) was a sister of Mrs. Nehama Stampfer, and a daughter of Rabbi Tzvi Pesah and Rebbitzen Gitta Malka Frank of Jerusalem. For nearly six decades, Rabbi Menahem Sacks (1896-1987) was a leading Jewish educator in Chicago, IL. Dave probably got to know Rabbi and Mrs. Sacks through Rabbi and Mrs. Stampfer. An obituary for Rabbi Menahem Sacks can be read online at: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1987-02-09-8701100903-story.html>

Hebron.²⁴ Please deliver this pleasant message to Rabbi & Mrs. Stampfer, although I am dropping them a card.

I have been very, very busy as you can imagine – not having time to write. This letter was scribbled in great haste. Rest assured that nothing that I can write or that words can describe can do justice to the beauty of Palestine. From time to time, however, I should attempt to write you a letter of what I see. In the past three weeks I have lived through a lifetime – travel of this sort broadens the mind more than a university education.

Please write often C/O Yeshiva Keneseth Israel; Hebron, Palestine. I hope you are all enjoying the best of health. Send me some pictures of you all including frames. I have some snapshots taken at the pyramids which I shall send (IY”H)²⁵ next week.

Give my love to all. Reassure Uncle Abe that I have taken a good step in coming to Palestine and that, with the help of G-d, I shall realize my ambition and heart’s desire to know G-d’s Torah.

Love & devotion,

Dave

P.S. I have learned a good deal of Hebrew in the one week I have been in Palestine.

PS #2 – Remember that I receive no newspaper – so write all the news. If you please, Herbert, write off & subscribe for the “Literary Digest” for me. That is the cheapest & best means of keeping up with the news. Please do so immediately. Dave

Hebron, Palestine

10/15/28

My dear Mother & Dad, (Amu”sh)²⁶

(Rabbi Yonason Sacks – Rosh ha-Yeshiva of the Beis Medrash L’Talmud / Lander College for Men in Queens, NY and rabbi of Agudas Yisroel Bircas Yaakov in Passaic, NJ – is one of the Rabbi and Mrs. Sacks’ grandchildren.)

²⁴ In a personal email, Dr. Shaul Stampfer (Jerusalem, Israel) identified him as Yaakov Frank (1913-1993) who later served in Israel’s Knesset. Dr. Stampfer reported that Yaakov survived the Hebron massacre, as he had left Hebron to spend that weekend in Jerusalem for a family celebration.

²⁵ IY”H is the English acronym for the Hebrew expression “*Im Yirtseh Hashem*” – “G-d willing.”

²⁶ Amu”sh is the English acronym for the Hebrew expression “*Ad me’ah ve-esrim shana*” – until one hundred and twenty years. It is a traditional Jewish blessing for longevity.

TRADITION

It is now ten days that I entered upon a new life – the life of a Hebron Yeshiva student. These ten days appear to me – now as I gaze back upon them reflectively – as so many years. Such great change of surroundings and mode of life always serves to magnify time. I feel that my past existence was only a dream & I have awakened to find the reality of life more enhanced than the dream . . .

. . . I have started in on the gargantuan task ahead of me – to become learned in the Torah. The Yeshiva here in Hebron offers wonderful opportunities for anyone possessing such an ambition. The faculty and student body both are full with professed scholars of Talmud and colossal minds in general. Boys of sixteen or less here could vie with the most learned professors in mental capacity.

But with all these favorable surroundings if one does not work himself he accomplishes nothing. My program calls for 8 ½ hours of intensive study of Talmud daily besides other subjects to which I also devote time. I have a private teacher for Tanach (Bible) and Hebrew grammar I study alone.

I think I wrote regarding the costs of my room & board before – £8 (\$40) a month for a beautiful room – and three good meals a day. I am paying £3 (\$15.00) a month for a private teacher of Talmud and £1 (\$5) a month for my rabbi of Tanach – that completes my budget of \$60.00 a month. If you will be so kind as to add \$5.00 a month to my allowance, Dad, I would be a rich man in spending money – as “pin” money²⁷ here means only 3 piastres²⁸ (15¢) for an occasional haircut – the best in town & equal if not better than a 75¢ cut in New York – 1 ½ piastres (7 ½¢) for a shave – they have a splendid little clipper machine here at Hebron’s deluxe barber shoppe which is a good substitute for the unpleasant powder.²⁹ Laundry prices advanced recently to 1 piastre .05¢ a shirt – so you can see that a New York pauper is a Hebron millionaire.

The one way to spend “big” money is to make a trip to Jerusalem – a private automobile carrying four people costs each 5 piastres (25¢), and a day at Hotel Warshafsky with three meals which Goetlieb’s or

²⁷ “Pin Money” was once a commonly used slang term for funds given to one’s wife or children by the head of a household for discretionary spending.

²⁸ The Piastre was a unit of currency commonly used in the Ottoman Empire.

²⁹ Dave is referring to depilatory powder which would be mixed with water to form a paste and then lathered on one’s face. After a few minutes, the mixture would be removed together with all the facial hair beneath it. While this process was both uncomfortable and malodorous, prior to the electric clipper (and later the electric shaver), it was the only way to remain clean-shaven while avoiding the Torah’s prohibition against shaving with a razor (Leviticus 19:27).

Trotsky's³⁰ does not equal – all for 40p. or \$2.00. But a trip to Jerusalem, as you can see will have to be an unusual luxury with my schedule of study and my limited budget.

The Yeshiva itself is a revelation to me. The boys surely fall far short of the popular conception of what a “Yeshiva Bacher”³¹ is. They, for the most part, are neatly and modernly dressed – although a bit shabby, of course. In manners and deportment they are perfect – the Yeshiva is insistent upon a high standard of etiquette within the Yeshiva and outside as well. The character of each of the 200 students is of the highest imaginable. Even I was surprised at what I have found. The student body is composed of the purest type of idealists. There are both married and single men ranging in age from 20 to 60 – already ordained Rabbis sit and learn all day and support themselves from teaching the younger students.

There is a very interesting case here of Rabbi Sokolov³² who is a young man of around 30 and a great Talmudical scholar, who was offered a Rabbinical position of note recently in Europe. His wife, an American young lady³³ (who fell in love with him on a visit here) refused to allow him to accept & insisted that he remain in the Yeshiva to learn so that he may become a famous man. And this charming young woman, accustomed to the luxuries of an American home, and moreover a wealthy bank, keeps three American boys as boarders who pay her £12 (\$60.00) a month each – in order that her husband should learn in the Yeshiva. He teaches a few hours a day to help along. Such cases are typical – I mention this one because Mrs. Sokolov is an American born. To visit their home (which I do often) is an inspiration.

The American boys (3 boys from England also), of whom there are 17, are all fine chaps – two college graduates among them. I have become intimate friends with one, a chap named Berman³⁴ who received “Semicha”

³⁰ None of the long-time residents of Memphis' Jewish community whom I communicated with recognized the names of these two establishments. Perhaps they were kosher restaurants in New York City where Dave and his family had dined during their many travels.

³¹ Hebrew for “young man.”

³² Dave is referring to Rabbi Ephraim Sokolover (1901-1968), - who would eventually serve as the first Chief Rabbi of Raanana, Israel.

³³ Mrs. Bernstein-Sokolover was among the American citizens listed as seriously wounded during the 1929 Hebron riots. See this document from the US Consul General in Jerusalem to the US Secretary of State dated August 26, 1929: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1929v03/d25>

³⁴ As can be seen at several points throughout Dave's letters, he built a close friendship with “Bill” Berman. Tragically, like his good friend Dave, Bill was murdered during the Hebron massacre.

TRADITION

from the New York Yeshiva³⁵ & decided to come to Hebron to learn something. A handsome fellow and an excellent speaker. I heard of him back in New York yet.

All in all, I thank G-d every minute of the day that He brought me to the Yeshiva here in Hebron. Here, not only can I best acquire that knowledge which I seek but I am in a thoroughly Jewish atmosphere and on holy ground.

And you my dear parents, I only pray that you should always be as happy as I am at present. May G-d bless you with continued good health, peace of mind & that happiness which comes from good children.

I don't know why I am this serious tonight. Perhaps because it is past midnight and writing by lamplight I am brought to a more serious frame of mind . . .

. . . I shall leave off here and finish the letter, please G-d, tomorrow – Good night.

Tuesday evening

. . . Today the new term began officially. We listened to two splendid lectures – one by the dean of the Yeshiva Rabbi Hagaon M. M. Epstein (Yichyeh) one of our greatest living Talmudists – and Rabbi Leib³⁶ (Yichyeh) who lectured on Mussar – or what might be termed “The Philosophy of Judaism” . . .

Loads of love and kisses,

Dave

Hebron

Nov. 20, 1928

My dearest Mother, (Amu”sh)

. . . You ask me in your letter to tell you something about Hebron. Well I shall do my best but bear in mind that my piece-meal description will fall short of doing Hebron justice.

As I wrote previously, the city of Hebron is situated amongst the “mountains of Judah”, famous in Biblical history and dear and sacred to Jewish hearts. Driving by automobile from Jerusalem, (that is the only means of transportation besides the donkeys) you are thrilled at the beauty of graceful hills and valleys. Everything is a golden brown and a very deep

³⁵ i.e. Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary in New York City.

³⁶ Rabbi Yehuda Leib Hasman (1869-1935) joined the Yeshiva in Hebron in 1926 to serve as its mashgi’ah.

green, & even though the sun is quite strong as only the Oriental sun is, you are forced to remove your sun glasses by the sheer natural scenic beauty. I tell you in your wildest flights of imagination you could not picture Palestine. And to crown your sensations you are ever aware that you are treading on holy ground – that you are breathing holy air. This, this you say over & over again to yourself is the land given as a Divine gift to our ancestors – this is the land from which religion and civilization spread to the rest of the world – the light of spirituality, Zion – this is the land of prophecy, the land where the Divine Presence (the ‘Shechinah’) rested in the Holy of Holies in our sacred Temple.

These sentiments & more are ever in your mind and heart here in Palestine. You would think that familiarity would wear off the enthusiasm but it does not – quite the contrary. And especially are you in a state of constant inspiration here in Hebron. Just think – here within ten minutes walk is the ‘Cave of the Machpelah’ where the Arbah Zugos (the four couples) lie buried: Adam & Eve; Avraham & Sarah; Isaac & Rebecca; Jacob & Leah!! In the Zechus (merit) of the Patriarchs we live under Divine light & protection. History has it that such as the Ramban (Nachmanides),³⁷ ‘Baal Reshith Hachmah,’³⁸ & others are also laid in rest here in Hebron since Jewish tradition tells us that the Resurrection will begin here. Therefore, Avraham named the place Hebron (meaning “the joining” i.e. the reuniting of the body and soul).

But still I have told you nothing about Hebron, have I? But I shall leave that for tomorrow if time will allow. Even after midnight it happens at times that ‘Bill’ Berman & I are engaged in some heated discussion which refuses to be interrupted by letter writing.

Wednesday Evening

It is now 8 P.M. According to schedule I should be in the Yeshiva learning Mussar – which means in English “exhortation” as near as I can translate it. Every evening except Friday the entire student body gathers in the Yeshiva to learn Mussar. The central theme of Mussar is man’s elevated position and manifold duties ... [?] Mussar is condensed Jewish ethics & morals in other words. But from this meager account you get little of the true idea of these inspiring half hours from 8 to 8:30 each evening before “Maariv” prayer services.

³⁷ There are conflicting traditions as to where Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman (1194-1270) is buried. Some believed he was buried in Hebron.

³⁸ Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas (1518–1587, Hebron) was a 16th-century rabbi in Ottoman Palestine. He was a student of Rabbi Moses ben Jacob Cordovero and Rabbi Isaac Luria. He is best known for his pietistic work entitled “*Reishit Hokhma*.”

TRADITION

But now to come to Hebron. The city is distinctly divided into two parts the “ancient quarter” and the “new city”. (By all that is proper I should not term Hebron a “city” but since I have joined the Chamber of Commerce I must boast!) Coming into the city from Jerusalem and Bethlehem you enter at once into the heart of the ‘new quarter’ & among the first large buildings which greet your eyes are the big stone structures of the Yeshiva and the beautiful homes of Rabbi Hagaon Epstein, Shlit”a and that of Rabbi Yehezkel, two of the faculty of the Slobodka Yeshiva of Hebron.

As you proceed further down the main thoroughfare (we Americans have dubbed it “Broadway”) you begin to notice that all buildings are of stone – not even one of wood. The reason therefore is obvious, building stone is plentiful, timber scarce. But you can well picture that it adds to the beauty of a city.

As you walk further down “Broadway” many interesting sights attract your American eyes. For one thing you see figures which appear to be human beings and yet whose appearance belies the fact. Imagine walking down Main Street and every direction you turn you see a ghost (or what seems to be a ghost) – shrouded some in white sheets some in black – faces & all covered. These “ghosts” you discover later to be the Arab women . . .

. . . Then you notice camels galore – they are used along with donkeys as beasts of burden. It is not long before you perceive that water is the business of the city. Yes you buy water in Hebron, & by the five gallon can too. Everyone seems to be hauling water, some on donkeys in large cans and some in queer looking skins astrap [?] their shoulders. I was here for two days before I learned that these were not slaughtered sheep & goats but only animal skins containing water. An interesting sight surely!

And listen to this! You should see the Hebron street flushing dept. The chief & his army of two with large ox skins loaded with water sprinkle our Hebron thoroughfares in deluxe style. Their method is as follows – they hold the open end of the skin with right hand – the skin being strapped across their backs. He dances from side to side of Broadway shaking a “shimmy” and everything but a “black bottom”³⁹ as he goes – the water emerges in huge spurts that rival the mighty flow of our kitchen faucet.

³⁹ These two popular Jazz Age dances swept through America in the 1920’s and 1930’s. I was relieved to learn that “Black Bottom” was not a racially charged term. An explanation of this term can be found online at: <https://www.quora.com/Is-a-title-like-Black-Bottom-Stomp-racist>

I still have told you nothing of Hebron itself have I – but –
To be continued in our next . . .

Hebron, Palestine

12/19/28

The 5th of Teves, Parshas Vayigash 5689

Dear Mother, (Amu”sh)

. . . Chanukah came merrily with “Latkie” parties and went with pre-nuptial celebrations. Two of the “high lights” – the Yeshiva’s foremost scholars – are about to be married (to put it prosaically). The Tannaim occasioned celebrations such as are witnessed once in a lifetime. I positively could not do justice in a description of these affairs. You must all visit a true Yeshiva in person if you would know what Yeshiva life is.

But don’t infer that a ‘Yeshiva Bacher’ has time for too many parties. I can count only six in almost three months including Chanukah week. Oh no, time here is considered too valuable for other pursuits than study. It is said of some “Bacherim” here that they would have been married long ago but they don’t want to take sufficient time off to attend the ceremony.

This week more than anytime thus far I have felt progress made in my studies here. So it is studying Talmud – you plug away constantly without denoting any increase of knowledge – feeling no perceptible change, then suddenly you perceive the change – the improvement. Something similar to a sudden ray of light entering a dark room . . .

. . . Thank G-d, I hear no fire crackers or any other evidence of a ‘Xmas’ holiday here in Hebron. (One great advantage of living in an Arab settlement.) The Arabs nurse an intense hatred for the Christians because of their missionary activities, & rightfully so.

Four years ago when the Yeshiva moved from Slobodka to Hebron, there occurred not a little trouble from the Arabs here. Stones were thrown into the institution buildings; students were attacked on the streets, etc. The present state of affairs speaks much for the excellent character of the Yeshiva student body. By the sheer force of refinement of action and nobility of heart the Yeshiva Bacherim have won over the Arabs as their staunch friends from former enemies. In every step, in every word – in speech & action the student is a gentleman. Even Arabs were conquered by these weapons.

But friendly relations started in the following manner. A young Arab pelted the Rabbi’s home with stones – injuring two members of the family and causing considerable damage in broken windows, etc. He was

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arrested and brought to trial. The Rabbi went before the judge and pleaded that the culprit be set free. This event occurred some three years ago – ever since then – there has been no trouble whatsoever – & to the contrary now the Arabs treat the Yeshiva students with utmost respect and courtesy. “A soft answer turneth away wrath” said Solomon in Proverbs⁴⁰ & here we see the truth . . . of his wisdom . . .

. . . Love,
Dave

Hebron, Palestine

June 17, 1929

11 Sivan – Parshas Beha’alosecha – 5689

Dear Folks, (Amu”sh)

This letter is being written at a great cost. I literally tore myself away from the greatest affair of my experience in order to get off this weekly note. Hebron resounds with the voices of merry makers – the streets are overflowing with dances, confetti, Hebron’s best (only) brass band, and a stray violin or mandolin. What is the occasion you ask? Why, who in Palestine does not know: Rabbi M. M. Epstein’s daughter⁴¹ was married today! And when an event of this sort is celebrated by a personage such as Rabbi Moshe Mordechai Epstein (Shlit”a) – the Chief Rabbi of Hebron, and Dean of Slabodka-Hebron Yeshiva – why royalty [?] never accounted of higher prestige!!

I am so full of the excitement of the day (and some “Mashkeh”⁴² besides!) that I find it difficult to write coherently. Let me jot down some few points of interest. Every notable of Hebron – both Arab & Jewish attended the affair: the English Governor, chief of police, the police commissioner of the Hebron district, many Arab sheiks arrayed in their turbans and glistening silk robes. Then the entire Jewish community of course turned out – the Sephardic Jews with every one of their “Hahams”⁴³ – etc.

First in order there was the “groom procession” from the groom’s residence to the bride – the veil ceremony – then the procession to the

⁴⁰ Proverbs 15:1

⁴¹ In a personal email, Rebbitzin Dr. Esther Farbstein (Jerusalem, Israel) identified this wedding as that of Tzila (aka Tzivyah / Tzviyah) Epstein and Rabbi Aharon Cohen (who would later serve as one of the heads of the Chevron Yeshiva). Rebbitzin Dr. Farbstein also emailed me a copy of their printed wedding notice.

⁴² Hebrew term for alcohol.

⁴³ Sephardic term for “Rabbi.”

“Chuppah”⁴⁴ – which was situated in open air in the courtyard of the Yeshiva – then the entire “city” with the advance and vanguard of dancers and music proceeded to the bride’s home – we snapped quite a few pictures of the parade and the crowd in general. I hope they come out well.

There are hundreds of out of town guests come to stay here to honor our Rabbi. Among these are Rabbi P.N. Frank⁴⁵ and wife (Mrs. Stampfer’s parents). There are numerous Americans here – the Harbater family⁴⁶ motored down from Jerusalem in their Cadillac, bringing quite a few guests along – and an American newspaper correspondent – practically all tourists came down to witness this extraordinary affair. A Dr. Goldstein (a West Wend Ave. physician of N.Y.) took some hundred feet of movies of the procession & ceremony. He promised to send me a duplicate film of the pictures entitled “A Royal Wedding”⁴⁷. I can have it projected at some American home in Jerusalem – probably at the Harbaters. The American guests in particular marveled at the affair – the grandness – the fine spirit – the modern character – and in general the genuine Jewish atmosphere of “Simcha Shel Mitzvah”⁴⁸.

Well, you folks will have to excuse me: the banquet tables are now being set, and I would not do for one of the Mechutanim⁴⁹ not to be there. (You know of course, that every Yeshiva student is a Mechutan at a Yeshiva wedding.)

Our American family was increased by one this past week – a worthy addition, a graduate Rabbi of Chicago⁵⁰ – Rabbi of Springfield, IL for 4 years – determined to spend a few years in study – fine type of fellow! . . .⁵¹

⁴⁴ Hebrew for marriage canopy.

⁴⁵ Dave must have meant to write “Rabbi Z.P. Frank.”

⁴⁶ The Harbater family moved to Jerusalem from New York. Two of their sons studied at the Hebron Yeshiva with Dave, and he mentioned them in a few other letters. On August 26, 1929, the JTA reported that Eliezer (Lester) and Moses (Max) Harbater – were among the American students of the Hebron Yeshiva who were wounded during the massacre. See: <https://www.jta.org/1929/08/27/archive/consul-reports-names-of-yeshiva-victims> and <https://www.jta.org/1929/08/28/archive/arab-victims-names-as-verified-by-state-dept>

⁴⁷ Unfortunately, I was unable to figure out the identity of the Dr. Goldstein whom Dave wrote of. If this film of the “Royal Wedding” still exists, it would have incredible historical value.

⁴⁸ A joyous occasion wherein mitsva observance is celebrated.

⁴⁹ Hebrew term for “in-laws.”

⁵⁰ Chicago’s *Beit Ha-Midrash La-Torah* (Hebrew Theological College) – which later relocated to Skokie, Illinois.

⁵¹ Dave is referring to Rabbi David Winchester (1898-1976) – whom he had just befriended. It seems, however, that Rabbi Winchester served as Springfield’s rabbi for a shorter period than Dave’s initial impression as noted above. According to this

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. . . The songs that greet my ears coming from the “palace” (as we term the Rabbi’s home) is too tempting to stay home and write.

Love & kisses,

Dave

P.S. Shavuoth was grand – spent the entire night learning & drinking black coffee to keep awake. This “all night party” began at 10 P.M. and broke up after morning services at 8:30 A.M. . . .

Hebron, Palestine

August 20, 1929

14 Av 5689

Dearest Dad, (Amu”sh)

. . . “Tisha B’Av”⁵² in Jerusalem! What an inspiration – what a poignant sense of sorrow and mourning!!

I accompanied several friends – all students of the Yeshiva to Jerusalem for Tisha B’Av. As we walked along Jerusalem streets we could almost imagine the streams of Jewish blood flowing at our feet – the horrible scenes of slaughter! Jewish sages – budding youth – tender babes in their mother’s arms, all killed by the barbaric sword of the enemy.

A visit to the “Wailing Wall” brought our national tragedy home to us in the strongest sense. Our sacred Temple destroyed! The actual & literal dwelling place of the Almighty – the fountain from which Divine light emanated to the entire world. Our Sages express themselves as follows: “Had the Romans but known what great benefits & blessings she

article, Congregation B’nai Abraham of Springfield, IL welcomed Rabbi Winchester as its first rabbi in 1927: <http://www.sj-r.com/article/20130301/NEWS/303019846>

For a moving biographical article on Rabbi Winchester, see Rabbi Moshe Kushner, *Chicago Rabbis: Visionaries, Pioneers, and Leaders 1847-1950* (Chicago: Chicago Rabbinical Council, 2014), 201–203. That article also states that Rabbi Winchester began serving as a rabbi in Springfield in 1927. Dave Shainberg certainly would have clarified this minor detail – if only his budding friendship with Rabbi Winchester would not have been cut so short.

In this document from the US Consul General in Jerusalem to the US Secretary of State dated August 26, 1929, Rabbi Winchester is listed among the American citizens who were seriously wounded during the 1929 Hebron riots: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1929v03/d25>

⁵² *Tisha be-Av* (The Ninth of Av) is a day of mourning and fasting. The day commemorates various national tragedies that befell the Jewish people throughout history, particularly the destruction of the two Temples in Jerusalem.

enjoyed from the Succoth sacrifices she would never have destroyed the Temple.”⁵³

This year had an especial import for Tisha B’Av: No doubt you have all been following news of the “Wailing Wall”. The Arabs are employing all their inherent slyness and cunning to confiscate this holiest of Jewish relics of a glorious past. Jerusalem has been in a state of constant excitement and tension for ten months now, and Tisha B’Av this tension reached almost the breaking point. The wailing at the wall was heart rending to hear – even the so called irreligious among us (the Chalutzim)⁵⁴ prayed with a fervor at the Chatzar HaKosel.⁵⁵ And to top it all – some 2,000 Chalutzim marched in a body to the Wall and there in the very face of the British soldiers engaged in a fiery demonstration against Great Britain (because of British and to the Arab cause in the Wall controversy). It was an awe inspiring scene to witness these young people – sturdy and strong – raise their hands before the Holy W. Wall and take a solemn oath to defend the last remains of the Jewish Temple with their last drop of blood.⁵⁶ If our irreligious – our sons and daughters who follow a false path can display such sacrificing and gallant spirit, what should our Torah true Jews not do?

Truly, if forced to do so, I could derive nourishment for an entire lifetime – both spiritual and inspiring – from these twenty four hours in Jerusalem.

I saw Mrs. Stampfer again last week.⁵⁷ Her mother has been ordered to spend a few weeks in Hebron as a cure. (The Hebron air is considered

⁵³ See *Midrash Vayikra Rabba* 1:11: “Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi taught, if the nations of the world would have known how the Sanctuary benefited them, they would have surrounded it with tents and barracks [to protect it] . . .”

⁵⁴ This Hebrew term that was used in referring to the young pioneers who were usually involved in agricultural work.

⁵⁵ The Western Wall’s courtyard.

⁵⁶ Dave had witnessed the Tisha be-Av march which was organized by several groups including the “Pro-Wailing Wall Committee” and the Revisionist Zionist Betar Youth Movement. Tragically, this event would be used by Haj Amin al-Husseini (the infamous Grand Mufti of Jerusalem) as a pretext to whip his coreligionists into a frenzy which, just days later, would develop into the savage riots of 1929. It was during those riots that Dave was ruthlessly murdered.

The JTA’s August 18, 1929 report of what Dave witnessed can be found online at: <https://www.jta.org/1929/08/18/archive/2000-demonstrate-in-jerusalem-demand-free-access-of-jews-to-wall>

⁵⁷ Rabbi and Mrs. Stampfer visited their family in Israel during the summer of 1929. I spoke with the Stampfers’ son – Rabbi Joshua Stampfer (born 1921) of Portland, Oregon on July 9, 2018. In the course of our conversation, he remarked how he still vividly remembers that frightful summer.

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extraordinary even in Palestine). Accordingly, I shall now have the opportunity of seeing & talking with Mrs. Stampfer more than otherwise – since she will no doubt spend a good deal of time here with her mother . . .

. . . Received a package from Frankfurt, Germany yesterday. Have not had the opportunity to take the 5 minute walk to the post office yet. I surmise, however, that it is a package of books from Mr. Nathan Adler. He promised me that he would mail me some German books which I had asked of him – from Germany. Upon his return to America, and a visit to Memphis, please inquire from him the cost & reimburse him. I smiled to see the card addressed to Herr Rabbiner Shainberg – Mr. Adler is kidding me along.

What's new in Memphis, Dad? I still await the long promised photographs & snapshots.

How's Mother's health & your own? I pray – good.

My ever present love & kisses.

Devotedly,

Dave