

magen avraham  
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מגן אברהם  
the ads

I KNEW MY father-in-law, Rabbi Chaim Avraham Eliyahu ben Moshe Yosef, z”l, lived above nature when I first drove with him. While visiting them in Montreal, usually for Pesach, I would often accompany him on one of his many trips from his suburban community to the city to take care of his aged mother and in-laws.

In-between his classes and meetings, we would race to the city on a poorly cared for highway, battling the roads and traffic to get as many errands done in so little time. He almost died falling out of a window as child. Apparently it made him fearless on the roads.

He wasn’t the best driver, and the conditions of the drive did not help that. Countless times I automatically put my foot on an imaginary brake on the passenger side, and usually had to unwind for at least an hour when we got to our destination in one piece. THAT was only, I became convinced, because some angel watched over him.

Sometimes he made the 30-minute-each-way trip twice a day, with or without me. And he NEVER complained about it. He was a VERY busy man, but he was also devoted, together with my mother-in-law, may she live in good health until 120 years, to making sure that their parents had what they needed WHEN they needed it.

It has been asked why in the Shemonah Esrai we only refer to “Magen Avraham,” and not “Magen Yitzchak” and “Magen Ya’akov” as well, since we start off mentioning all three. Surely God was a “shield” for all of them!

There are many answers, one of which is from Rav Dessler. He says that only Avraham Avinu required “extra” protection from God, because he did “field work.” Avraham was the only one of the three Avos to be out in the streets doing outreach (Sotah 10b). He, unlike his son and grandson, intermingled with the riff-raff, in order to teach them about God.

Anyone who has done outreach knows that it is a spiritual tug-of-war. In an effort to make non-religious people feel comfortable, religious compromises have to be made. Over time, it goes from “accommodation” to an officially lower level of religious dedication. It’s an occupational hazard.

But why should someone who is religious try to strengthen the emunah of the spiritual weak become weaker in the process? They shouldn’t, and to make sure they don’t, God gives them extra protection, as he did for Avraham while he did God’s work.

HaRav Chaim AVRAHAM Eliyahu ben HaRav Moshe Yosef, z”l, was a true “Avraham” in every sense of the term. His house was a “tent” with doors open on all four sides, so-to-speak. Everyone was welcome, and many came to

learn with my father-in-law and became religiously independent over time.

Time. Where did my my father-in-law find the time to devote so much of it to each and every person that he tried to help? At last count, there were only 24 hours in a day. How did my father-in-law fit 28 hours worth of work into a 24 hour day?

I don't know. Most of us can barely fit 14 hours of work into a 24-hour day. But, I'm sure that warranted extra protection from God. So convinced was I that, as my father-in-law weakened towards the end, I had kavanah for his recovery specifically during the brochah of "Magen Avraham."

It all comes back to praise you in the end. His efforts were not forgotten, not by the people whom they directly helped, and not by those who knew the stories. As one person mentioned at the levayah: Just as the Talmud says Ya'akov Avinu didn't die, likewise the legacy of my father-in-law means that he won't "die" either.

It is a legacy that did not begin as it has for some many other Jews. As a teenager, he had to secretly escape Russian oppression with his family, and was almost captured. Miracles saved them, first from the Russians and later from the Nazis.

When the new Jewish state was formed, he went there to help as well. At first he worked with the underground, but later, once the state was actually official and already fighting for its life, he joined the IAF. An injury sent him home, but his love for the Jewish homeland never wavered. Indeed, it brought him back to live out his final years on Jewish soil. He had been all over the world, but the land of his love was his final stop and resting place.

His love of Torah was inspirational. As much as he loved to teach he loved to learn. Not just Torah, but primarily Torah. He was a lover of knowledge, but Torah knowledge most of all. Torah insight thrilled him, and as with everything he personally enjoyed, he loved to share it with others.

And he hated injustice. He was a warm person who loved to make others laugh. But if he came across an injustice, it overtook his sense of calmness to the point of zealousness. How many important causes did he devote himself to, even taking risks for them? More than we will ever know, and certainly more than I can write about here.

Then there was Pesach. No holiday is more difficult to prepare for than Pesach, and that's only for a family of a couple of people. What about if 20 people are joining you for Pesach—the ENTIRE week, year after year? What about if you have to do all that preparing while having busy jobs, and while doing the same for your OWN parents? When do you sleep, if you work by day and prepare by night?

I used to watch my mother-in-law move about the kitchen that somehow was miraculously ready for Pesach, in spite of her own busy and tiring schedule. She and my father-in-law were a team in every sense of the idea. They somehow kept up with each other, and though they didn't move faster than the speed of light it certainly seemed as if they did sometimes.

While I called it a day and headed for bed, my mother-in-law would cook and prepare for the upcoming holiday. She seemed to move effortlessly, as if merely getting ready for a simple Shabbos, and for just a couple of peo-

ple. Somehow it resulted in a small camp's worth of food for eight days.

I often did the math, but it never added up. What the two of them were able to accomplish in the little time they had with the energy they SHOULD have had, just didn't make sense. I know they didn't cheat. I checked the medicine cabinet and found no secret time capsules or energy drinks.

Then there was the chayn. "Noach found chayn in the eyes of God," and survived the Flood because of it. You would think that chayn would get more press coverage, given its centrality in history. Chanukah is really CHAYNukah, and chinuch is really CHAYNuch. Chayn is truly a person's saving grace and needs to be taught.

Most people, upon become adults, lose their chayn. They had it as children, but they lose it once they "grow up." They become serious, TOO serious often. Survival instincts make people overly protective, so they put up walls that tend to keep their chayn in and the chayn of others out.

Not my father-in-law, though. His chayn remained. He had a boyish charm until the day he left this world for the world that is COMPLETELY chayn. He dared to dream, and often big. And he was not afraid to be enthusiastic about life, and to show that enthusiasm to others. Even the puns he loved to make were chayn-y.

I was not there at the time his holy soul left his well-used and worn body, but I was shortly after. I had a chance to see his face one last time before he was taken for preparation for burial. "He had chayn in life, and even has chayn in death," I said to myself. It has left a lasting impression on me.

Only a couple of hours before he died, I felt compelled to tell my father-in-law a dvar Torah before leaving. I did not know if he could hear me well or focus on what I was saying, but he nodded at all the right places, so I told him the whole vort.

It was Motzei Shabbos Parashas Shemos. Redemption from Egyptian slavery was at hand, but increased suffering made it feel as if just the opposite was true. Even the great Moshe Rabbeinu had questioned the turn of events, especially since he had seemed to cause them.

I happened to have picked up a new sefer about the Final Redemption that morning at kiddush, and randomly turned to a page. To my delight, it just happened to be quoting verses from the parshah we had just read, and it addressed the issue of the “failed” first attempt at redemption. It had something to do with Moshiach Ben Yosef preparing the way for Moshiach Ben Dovid, which meant that the failure had been no failure at all, just Phase One of redemption.

I kept it as short as possible, and finished with the words, “It’s Zman Geulah, Abba, it’s Zman Geulah!” Apparently it was for my father-in-law as well. Just hours later, he was freed from his ailing body, able to finally begin his long-deserved ascent to the higher realms where Heavenly beings stood ready to receive his soul.

We talk about a deceased person as becoming a “meilitz yoshar,” a dedicated advocate on behalf of the Jewish people in Heaven. You can be sure that my father-in-law, Abba, already is. You can be sure that the first thing he did upon getting up there was make an appointment with the “Consulate General.” He won’t need to demand the release of Russian Jews this time, just the entire nation

from this fourth, long, and final exile. May it happen in our time.