

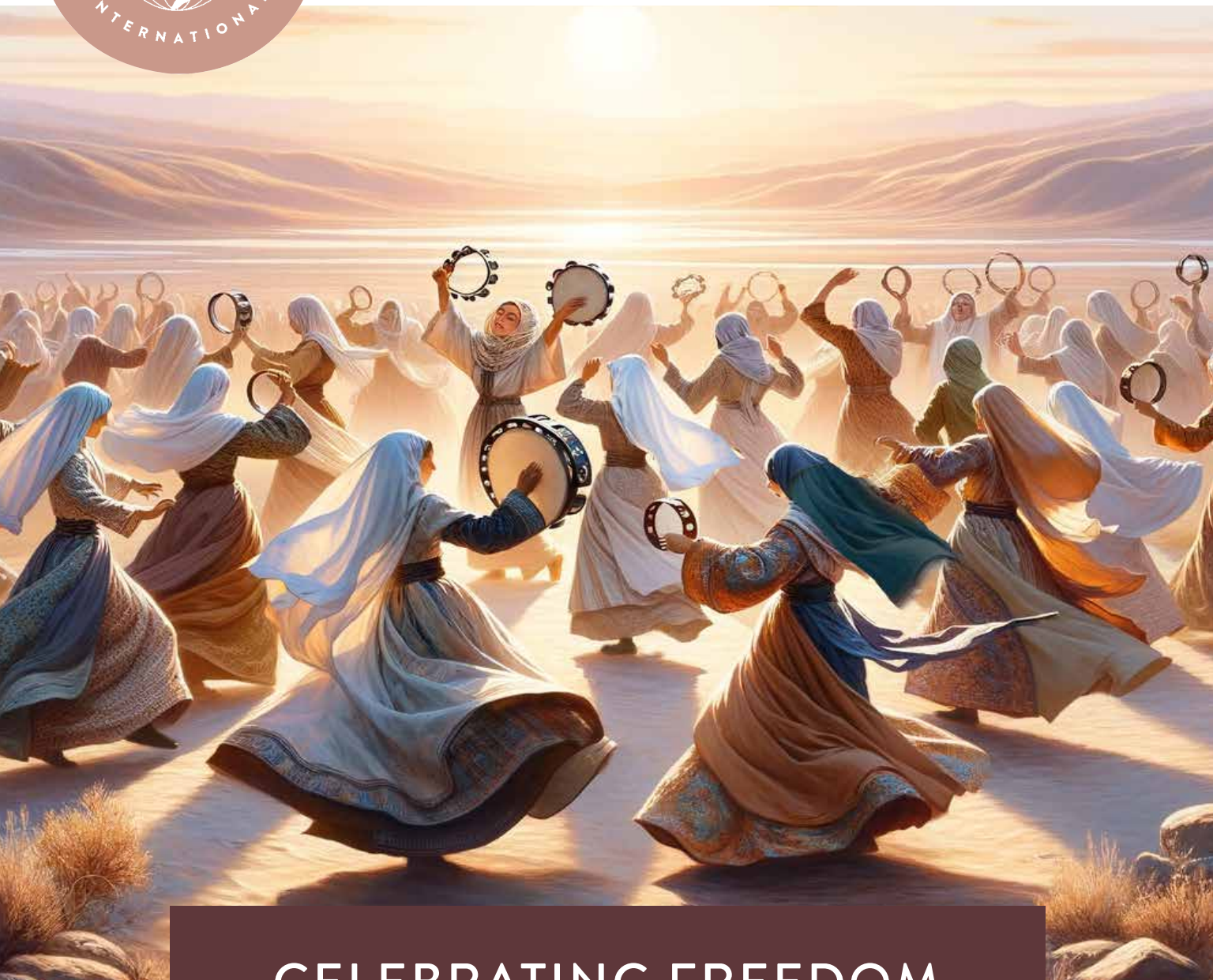


SPRING 5785

ב"ה Volume 6, Issue 2

EMBRACE

Uniting and inspiring the worldwide community of Bais Rivkah Alumnae



CELEBRATING FREEDOM

**PAYING IT FORWARD:
THE STORY OF A BAIS RIVKAH GIRL
IN THE 1970S**

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**THE FOUR SONS:
HOW TO REACH EACH CHILD
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ALUMNAE WEIGH IN ON
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March 2025, Volume 6, Issue 2. EmBRace is published 4 times a year by Associated Beth Rivkah Schools. Postage paid at Brooklyn, NY and additional post offices.

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Why Charva Wükes won't be buying her daughter Lululemon

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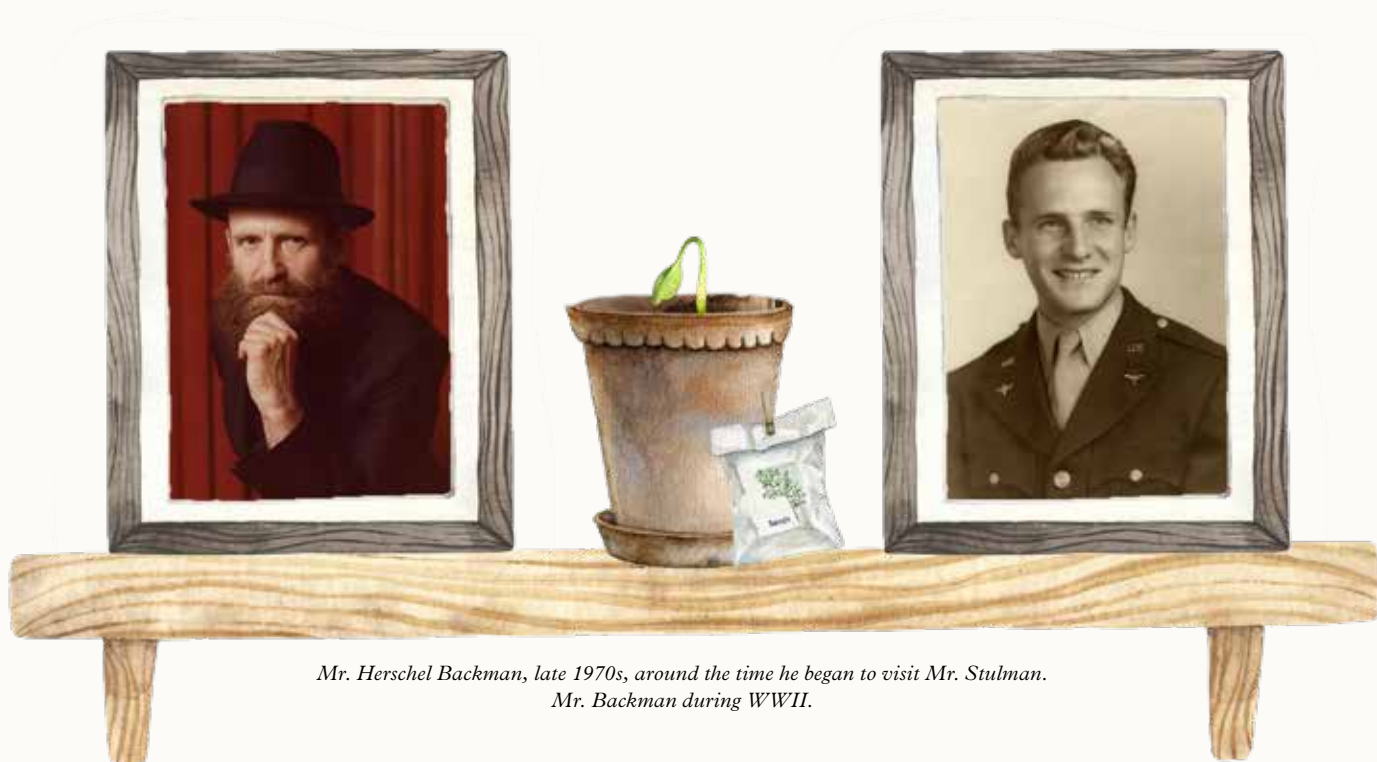
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*Mr. Herschel Backman, late 1970s, around the time he began to visit Mr. Stulman.
Mr. Backman during WWII.*

Seeds Sprout FOUR DECADES LATER



Dovid Zaklikowski

Photos: Lubavitch Archives and the Backman family

THE FASCINATING STORY OF A LUMBER MERCHANT, THE REBBE RAYATZ,
THE REBBE, AND BAIS RIVKAH.

He was dressed to perfection, carried himself with pride, and loved the young Backman girls. He brought the young Chani, Shevy, Leah, and Nechama Dina expensive gifts from FAO Schwarz, the iconic children's toy store in Manhattan. He would play with them on the floor. He took great pride in watching them play with a doll he gifted them, one that ate real food and soiled her diaper.

But unlike the giant stuffed dolls he purchased for them, which filled much of their living room, the octogenarian Julius Stulman did not tower over them. He was just one of the many guests that their parents would invite to their home. While they knew he had a chauffeur, he seemed to revel in the simplicity of their home. He came there for the Shabbos and Yom Tov atmosphere, and their father, Herschel, and Mr. Stulman would always have animated philosophical conversations—which the girls did not understand.

“He was a very doting grandfatherly type,” Leah Davidson, a proud Bais Rivkah alumna, said. “His gifts were unbelievable. With his personal chauffeur, he stood out amongst the other guests, but we treated him the same as the others who came.”

Mr. Backman was by then in his late fifties, but to his children, he seemed so young. “He lived his life for us,” Chani Elmaleh said, “always there to take us on an outing and to learn something new.” But perhaps most memorable was his notebook filled with names, and his Tehillim. Every Jew he met, he would try to keep in touch with. He would also ask them their name and their birthday. He would add each one to his recital of daily Tehillim.

He had a love for Judaism, and like his many convictions, he was compelled to share it with others. But it was not always Judaism. In the 1950s it was about laborers’ rights and union building. This activism got the WWII veteran and Harvard graduate in trouble with the FBI. Ultimately, he was forced to move

away from Massachusetts and soon found himself in Vermont where he worked in the typesetting room of a well-established printing press. He later became a salesman for the company, bringing to the company many new customers.

Once, when his aunt came to visit, she admonished him, telling him that he should get out of that position and climb up in the ranks of the company. With her push, he asked to become a partner at Capital City Press. While not the largest printer, it specialized in quick turnover, while maintaining its high quality. It soon became a favorite place for publishers of scholarly and medical journals.

Mr. Stulman, the editor and publisher of, among other journals, *Fields Within Fields*, “A quarterly forum for ongoing creative thinking about solutions of mankind problems,” and one looking for excellence, found himself at their doorstep. It was there that the intellectual publisher got to know Mr. Backman. But it would be a few years until they became like family.

In the late 1960s, a professor of sociology invited Mr. Backman to join a group to Crown Heights for Simchas Torah, “To study the phenomenal joy with Rabbi Schneerson on their joyous holiday.” There, the divorced father of four spent hours chit-chatting with the young 770 students. The next day, he found himself on the makeshift bleachers at a farbrengen with the Rebbe. He was not the pushing type of guy, and he soon fell and found himself banged up on the floor.



1. Mr. Backman dances at his wedding.

2. The Backman family around the time that Mr. Stulman would visit their home on Shabbos and Yom Tov.

3. The well-used book of names that Mr. Backman would say Tehillim for.

4. One of the Backman children with a doll Mr. Stulman gifted them.



It was a sea of black. The language was foreign. It was as if he was in another world, and now in a world below between sweaty feet and mist from above. The longer he languished there, the more he felt alone and that no one cared about his falling. But then he was suddenly lifted from the floor, and a plastic cup filled with wine was thrust into his hand.

The Rebbe had seen him fall and began motioning towards the bleachers that he should say l'chaim. Those on the bleachers thought the Rebbe was motioning to them, but the Rebbe ignored them. He then motioned to down below, Mr. Backman was lifted up, and he was told to say l'chaim to the Rebbe. He would regularly say about that experience, "I was forever lifted spiritually higher by the Rebbe."

With his focus on his customers in New York, Mr. Backman spent more and more time in New York. To satiate his appetite for Yiddishkeit, he rented an apartment in Crown Heights. At night, he would go to Hadar Hatorah to learn with Rabbi Abba Pliskin. An activist by nature, with his newfound love for Yiddishkeit, Mr. Backman looked to inspire more souls. Acquainted with Mr. Stulman, his office became one of Mr. Backman's mitzvaim stops. He brought tefillin with him and encouraged him in mitzvos and they soon became good friends.

It was only natural, when Mr. Backman married Sarah, that they would invite Mr. Stulman to their home for festive meals. When the Rebbe heard about it, he asked his office to call the Backmans, saying, "Please tell the lady of the home," that she should encourage Mr. Stulman to stay for the entire Yom Tov and not leave in the middle.

While Mr. Backman was an intellectual, he was also

a man of simple faith. Mrs. Backman shared that trait and it was not a challenge for them to ask Mr. Stulman to remain. But this did not mean that he would. While he appreciated the sentiment and thanked them for their hospitality, to him Judaism was philosophical. "Why would G-d care if I rest?" he exclaimed, and he marched out of the home to wait for his chauffeur.

On his heels, Mrs. Backman was having nothing of it. "The Torah says that one should not drive on the holiday," she simply told him. "The Rebbe asked that you stay." He was polite but said he had his fair share of the holiday and wanted to go. But she kept on going, explaining that the Torah is not just intellectual, it is a way of life. She stood between the cars and did not let him pass to the street.

"It was quite a scene," Mrs. Backman said, admitting that seemingly the Rebbe understood who to pass the message along to. In the end, Mr. Stulman relented to her simple faith, but something much more clicked in his mind as he went up the stairs to their Crown Street home.

It was over that Pesach day that he brainstormed an idea as to how he could make the education of his favorite Backman girls better, as well as contribute to the promulgating of Torah teachings. It would also have an impact on generations of young students until this day.

Seeding Judaism

From an early age, the young Yehudah "Julius" Stulman was a searcher. Born to Joseph and Ida, Eastern European immigrants to the United States,

5. Mr. Hershel and Mrs. Sarah Backman.
6. Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson, who was Mr. Stulman's first Lubavitch teacher.
7. Dr. Nissan Mindel, an aide to Rabbi Shmaryahu Gourary, and later the Rebbe.
8. The recorded minutes of the audience of Mr. Stulman with the Rebbe Rayatz and the Rebbe, then known as the Ramash.
9. A handwritten letter the Rebbe, then the Ramash, wrote to Mr. Stulman from Paris.



he had a golden spoon in his mouth from a young age. His father, a successful lumber merchant, purchased a home on Union Street in the upper-class Jewish neighborhood of Crown Heights.

There they were from the founding members of the local Brooklyn Jewish Center, a Conservative temple with a learned rabbi, the son of the Orthodox chief rabbi of Philadelphia Rabbi Dov Aryeh Levinthal. At the center was a bustling Hebrew school, but it did not capture the mind of the young lad. The same was true for his high school education, which he dropped out of as a teen.

Decades later he retold how he spent many days at his father's Emrick Lumber Company. He studied the tactics of the firm's best salesman and adapted them. On one day in 1923, he began to cold-call prospective customers, "starting from the letter L," and after a few hours, he had his first \$350 in commissions—some \$6,500 in today's money.

In 1929, the Rebbe Rayatz was in New York on a visit with several goals: 1. To see if the United States was suitable for the Lubavitcher movement to establish its headquarters. 2. To encourage the Jewish community to grow in their observance. 3. To raise funds for the Jews in the Soviet Union, where he was forced to emigrate from.

The Rebbe's visit was breaking news in the national Jewish community, and particularly in the New York press. "Great interest is being displayed by the many Jews," one report announced, when, "Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneerson, will arrive. ... The coming of the Lubawitscher [sic] is like the visitation from a saint."

During his time in New York, the Rebbe spent

several months in Crown Heights, near what is today the Brooklyn Children's Museum. During that visit, several intellectuals paid a visit to the Rebbe. "Although we have received some Jewish education," they told the Rebbe, "we do not believe that Yiddishkeit is a viable faith, and we are seeking such a faith."

One said that their children were losing their connection to Judaism because they lacked true spiritual nourishment. "Orthodoxy is too dry," one said, "Conservative too ceremonial, Reform without meaning."

The Rebbe Rayatz responded that he did not want to hear about what they did not want to do, or what they may lack in Jewish observance. "It is so only because you do not know how acting in that way is not good for you. Study Chassidus so that you will come to realize the negative effects such conduct has on you. It will teach you how to be the upstanding Jews you should be."

One of the leaders of that group was Alexander "Alec" Cowen, a successful life insurance agent and an intellectual, who also gave them classes in biblical studies. Mr. Stulman, a client who became a good friend of Mr. Cowen, would later join those classes.

By then Mr. Stulman had married Pauline Lesser, who did not take a liking to Mr. Stulman's pull to spirituality. Pauline was the daughter of Israel Lesser, a successful garment manufacturer, but perhaps more known for his bad business decisions and combative approach to competition.

Mr. Stulman, who by then had made his first million—in today's money twenty-four—had gone to NYU to study business psychology, and had made

a bold turn in his life. He despised that work would encompass one's entire life. He called for life to focus on the nucleus—the family—and the pursuit of spirituality and religion.

“In our search for truth we must concern ourselves primarily with direction,” he once said. “Pattern, process, purpose. Truth is a goal toward which we move, but which we never finally, completely reach. As we come nearer to the truth, it expands. We, too, must expand and grow.”

Growing spiritually was a part of his very being. However, like her father, Mrs. Stulman was combative, mostly towards the seeking of spirituality. Like most American Jews, she was forever wanting to assimilate deeper into the abyss of the American melting pot. On the other hand, Mr. Stulman's Jewish spark was aflame and she could not seem to stop it.

At one of the intellectual gatherings, Mr. Cowen invited Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson, one of the leading Chabad activists in the United States, to give a class on Tanya.

It was a tough crowd. Rabbi Jacobson taught a few lines, and then there was spirited debate. He spent several hours with them, until it was late, and they all agreed to invite him again.

The members of the group began to have a closer relationship with Lubavitch, and some began to observe mitzvos. One of them was Mr. Stulman, whom Rabbi Jacobson referred to as an “assimilated Jew, but a serious and sincere person, as well as a talented and very wealthy man.”

One time, Mr. Cowen told Rabbi Jacobson, “I have wonderful news for you: Mr. Stulman has started eating kosher!”

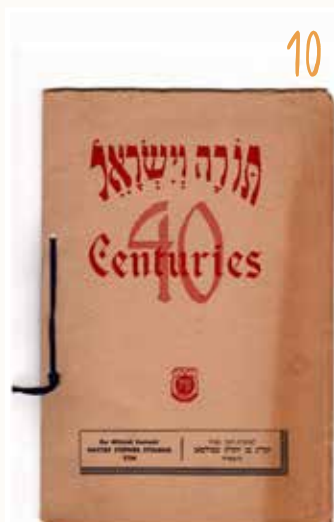
Mr. Cowen also reported directly to the Rebbe Rayatz about Mr. Stulman, and the Rebbe wrote to him in the summer of 1938: “I heard that you have great interest in Chabad Chassidus, which gave me great joy. I wish you much health, and luck in your business endeavors.”

Educational Seeds

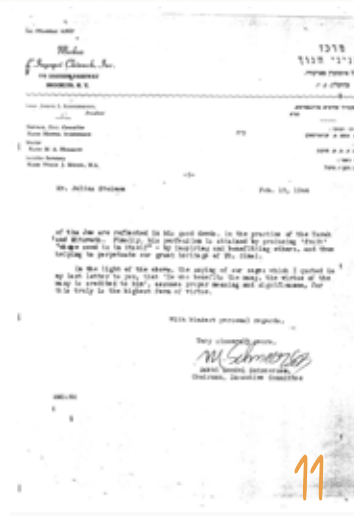
WWII had already begun in Europe when the young and talented Nissan Mindel met the Rebbe Rayatz in Riga, Latvia. “The Rebbe had decided to move his headquarters to the United States,” Dr. Mindel said in a 1974 interview with Rabbi JJ Hecht. Fluent in many languages, Dr. Mindel translated incoming mail and wrote the outgoing mail in English and German. With papers from the United Kingdom, he was able to join the Rebbe and his entourage to New York.

While at the time not a Lubavitcher, as a personal aide to Rabbi Shmaryahu Gourary of the United Lubavitcher Yeshivoh, Dr. Mindel witnessed firsthand the opposition to the Rebbe Rayatz's agenda in the goldene medina. “He knew what really ailed American Jewry,” he said, “and he was determined to correct the situation.”

He said that the Rebbe wanted to “revolutionize the whole thinking of American Jewry” and particularly the American Jewish leadership. “One of his first slogans,”



10



11



12



Dr. Mindel continued, was that “America is not different,” which the aide explained to mean that “we have one Torah which applies to America the same way it applies to Eastern Europe.”

The Rebbe, he said, was a “very soft man, a very warm-hearted person.” However, when it came to matters of principles, to the Torah, he “was inflexible; he was like steel.”

On the very morning of his arrival, the Rebbe established the United Lubavitcher Yeshivoh, his flagship endeavor on the shores of the United States. In an audience with several Jewish leaders and philanthropists, the Rebbe Rayatz explained that Jewish education needs to be on top of the Jewish communities’ list of projects.

“When one becomes acquainted with the true condition of Jewish education in America,” the Rebbe said, “one sees that hundreds of thousands of Jewish children receive no Jewish education at all, yet their parents are not in the least concerned, not feeling at all that they are doing an injustice to their children or that the children lack a Jewish education.”

The only way that the next generation can improve, is “[by] establishing Jewish education on an appropriate status.”

Mr. Stulman was inspired to assist the United Lubavitcher Yeshivoh, and through Mr. Cowen, who formed a relationship with the Ramash, gave towards the publications of the Merkos L’Inyonei Chinuch. His donations soon equaled, in today’s funds, hundreds of thousands of dollars.

However, during this time he was going through a crisis

of his own. His son Stephen, at Mrs. Stulman’s discretion, was studying at a boarding school in Massachusetts. There were few Jews there, and it was a Christian atmosphere. At one of the gatherings of the intellectuals, Mr. Cowen invited Dr. Mindel. “My husband wants to take him out of the school,” Mrs. Stulman told him. “My son is attracted to religion, but it is not a good idea to remove him from the prestigious school.”

Dr. Mindel explained to her that a child by nature is attracted to spirituality. “If he does not receive it from a proper Jewish environment, he will receive it from the Christian environment at the school.”

Soon Mr. Cowen joined the conversation and told her that she should enroll Stephen at the Ramaz Jewish Day School in Manhattan, where Dr. Leo Jung was the principal. The entire time, Mr. Stulman stood on the side. Later he thanked Dr. Mindel and told him of his efforts: “At that school, they eat non-kosher food and go to church. I want her to come to recognize that it is for the good of the child to remove him from there.”

In the end, the mother agreed that their son should go to classes with a Hebrew school teacher during the summer months, near their vacation home. It had a positive effect on the young child.

“I loved it,” Stephen said about those months of studying. “He exposed me to a whole world of Yiddishkeit with love and passion, which I had never been exposed to at home.” He took his Yiddishkeit seriously, studying on his own.

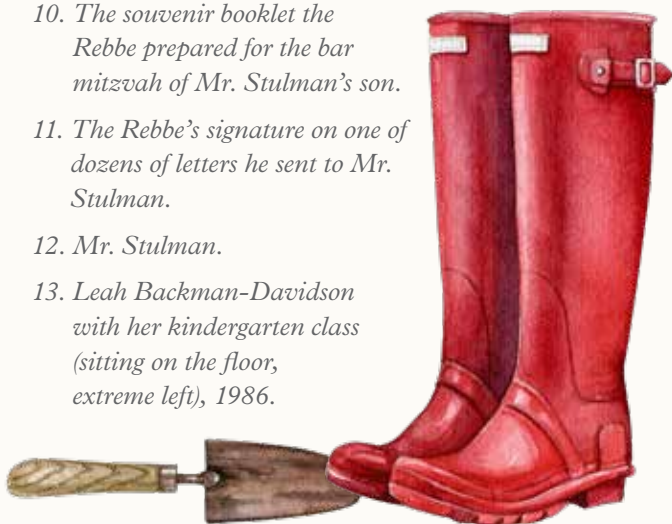
The Ramash had a booklet published for Stephen’s bar mitzvah, called *Forty Centuries: Milestones in Early*

10. *The souvenir booklet the Rebbe prepared for the bar mitzvah of Mr. Stulman’s son.*

11. *The Rebbe’s signature on one of dozens of letters he sent to Mr. Stulman.*

12. *Mr. Stulman.*

13. *Leah Backman-Davidson with her kindergarten class (sitting on the floor, extreme left), 1986.*





14. The Rebbe with Mr. Stulman following a radio interview with Rabbi Jf Hecht (center), 1989.

Jewish History. In his letter, Mr. Stulman thanked the Ramash for the souvenir for the event, adding, “We are indeed very grateful to ‘770’ in more ways than can be readily told.”

Foundational Roots

To run his business, Mr. Stulman looked at the globe and society as a canvas to study. He told anyone who would listen that the question people needed to ponder would be, “What will be five decades from now?” When working out a business plan, it was not about figuring out what the competition was doing now, but about living “as if,” competing against an entity in the future.

However, he admitted that despite his high standing and great success, he still craved appreciation. “Man is fragile,” he once wrote. “He bruises easily and often heals slowly. He is weak and lonely and easily discouraged. Of all his hunger, none is so powerful as his hunger for acceptance and love. He wants to be treated with respect. He would like to be understood, even though he may not very well understand himself.”

The Rebbe Rayatz, whom he referred to as his spiritual leader, gave him the much-needed support for his spiritual pursuits. The Rebbe wrote to him that when they met upon his arrival, they formed a spiritual bond, “and soulful comprehension beyond words.”

The Rebbe Rayatz wrote that over the next four years, it became clear to him, to his great joy, “that my intuitive feeling had correctly foretold me about you. I was supremely delighted to meet with you, with profound spiritual confidence that our get-together will bring eternal light to our people.”

The meetings with the Rebbe Rayatz, were powerful



15. A check from Mr. Stulman to Bais Rivkah Preschool in 1946, which would be around \$5,665.76 today.

experiences for Mr. Stulman. “Rebbe, please don’t talk,” he once said in the middle of an audience. “Just let me look into your eyes.”

But he was also an intellectual. He had a thirst for learning. “Man’s own worst enemy is within himself,” he explained. “His own ignorance is his greatest handicap. Out of that ignorance grows fear, self-doubt, envy, hatred, and self-hatred.”

In the Ramash, who became an integral part of the study group, he found deep intellect. Mr. Cowen would have long discussions with the Ramash, and would then deliver those ideas to the gathered. They also submitted written questions, and the Ramash responded with lengthy responses. When Dr. Mindel was at the class, he would also discuss afterward the questions raised, and in turn, he would deliver the responses to the group.

Mr. Stulman took to the many ideas of the Ramash, who was then an engineer at the Brooklyn Navy Yard—but also took the responsibility of Merkos L’Inyonei Chinuch (“Merkos”), the educational arm of Lubavitch, whose auspices the Bais Rivkah schools were under.

“I want to reiterate again how very pleased I was,” he wrote to the Ramash, “to have had the opportunity last night of a heart-to-heart talk with you. I believe it enabled me to gain a deeper insight into your spiritual world.”

In 1944, the Rebbe Rayatz called together the Ramash, Mr. Stulman, Dr. Mindel, and Mr. Cowen, for a meeting. Chief among the issues was the funding of the Bais Rivkah schools, which were looking to expand to being a day school: “Establish educational facilities for girls, a field that has been almost completely overlooked or neglected in America hitherto.”

At that time, Bais Rivkah was scattered among the various Jewish neighborhoods, as an afternoon school. The Rebbe Rayatz said that from his highest priorities was “the establishment of ten additional educational facilities for girls.”

The Ramash reiterated that the monetary issue was their greatest impediment to growth: “In the various departments of the Merkos there are priority projects that demand prompt action. We are often confronted with urgent demands which the Merkos are compelled to shelve for lack of funds.”

The idea was to create the Stulman Foundation which would give \$75,000—1.3 million in today’s funds—a year towards Merkos activities. “This proposal is the most important spiritual gift that I can bestow on you,” the Rebbe Rayatz said, “and I am confident that you will accept it and carry it out, with G-d’s help.”

The foundation as was envisioned did not come to fruition, though Mr. Stulman continued to be one of the greatest supporters of Merkos during the Rebbe Rayatz’s lifetime.

“I can hardly let this holiday period pass without straining myself to do what I can,” Mr. Stulman wrote to the Ramash in 1948, “for what you and your revered father-in-law so nobly stand for. You are constantly in my mind and exist as a positive, though silent, monitor for me—and I am sure for many others—exemplifying the highest that man can attain, almost like a silent electronic tube that in its mysterious way amplifies manifold the common neutron as it is bombarded by the grid and its power released in multiplied energy.”

Over the next five years, their views diverged. “I am sure that you will not take it amiss that I have on occasion expressed my views in disagreement with yours,” Mr. Stulman wrote. “I am equally sure that since, in the final analysis, we are both striving towards the same goal, our views will eventually converge upon an identical course.”

The central differences were that Mr. Stulman wanted to focus on bettering the general society, but the Ramash, now the Rebbe, believed that it was important to focus on the Jewish community first.

“I feel impelled to reiterate what I have emphasized on earlier occasions,” the Rebbe wrote in 5731. “Namely, the principle enunciated by our Sages of blessed memory, ‘The poor of thy town have priority.’ This means that a Jew, in dispensing good, must set up a scale of priorities and, clearly, his first duty is towards his Jewish people, all the more so since, in this way, the



good will indirectly accrue also to humanity at large.”

The Rebbe continued to remind him what the Rebbe Rayatz’s focus was when he arrived in the United States: “This is particularly imperative and urgent in the realm of Torah education of our boys and girls, in the spirit of Toras Emes, which allows no compromise since anything less than the full, pure truth is not truth. As you know, my father-in-law dedicated his life to this cause, and it is up to each and all of us to preserve and promote this priceless heritage.”

The Tree Grows

But that Pesach night of 1985, it all clicked together. The Torah was not just a way to be a better person, it was divine. G-d had a desire that the Jewish nation follow specific precepts. He had watched many of his grandchildren intermarry, a testament to their lack of connection to Jewish life. He saw the Backman children and their love for Jewish observance. Like never before, he understood the importance of a Torah education.

Over the next day at the Backman home, Mr. Stulman spoke of how he was going to give a donation to the school. At first, it was going to be for computers, then for bathrooms, but he had come to understand that what they needed most was a new building. How much would he give already? Mrs. Backman believed it would be a small sum. She later learned the amount and was stunned.

“I have been privileged to give to the Bais Rivkah School,” Mr. Stulman wrote in a 1987 letter to the school, “to the development of children dedicated to an understanding of helping to emerge and encourage the continued development of wisdom, understanding, and comprehension, to recognize that we have the ability to emerge comprehensively an understanding fed to us by G-d, through the knowing process, and help to guard against strictly a knowledge process.”

He emphasized the dedication to the studying of Torah and to fully understand what it means, “for it is not a reading; it is not a book; it’s an emergence, it’s a becoming, in the dedication of the meditative hours, the methodology of the Shabbos.”

He said that his spontaneous donation of \$340,000—in today's funds a million dollars—towards the new building on Lefferts Avenue, was because he wanted that the girls should comprehend the qualities of spiritual development through Torah, “for only then will mankind have a chance to resolve his problems.”

He wrote that not necessarily the smartest children are those who succeed in the government exams or those who have academic erudition “as is currently recognized.” Rather, “wisdom lies in the emergence of qualities and abilities and understanding and comprehension that G-d has given us.”

He wrote that the Torah makes people wise, as it says in Tehillim (19:8): “The teaching of Hashem is perfect ... making simple.”

After many decades, the Torah, studied by Jewish children in a Brooklyn school that two Rebbes encouraged him to support, would soon be able to thrive. In classic Mr. Stulman's style, it was all done anonymously. He wanted no honor—no plaque. What he did want the school to know: his donation was in honor of “my dear friends Sarah and Hershel Backman and their lovely children.”

In his letter, he concluded that it is so that the students at the school “can evolve to this development and not be trampled in the inadequacy of those who believe that science-technology, good memories and lots of book-learning and knowledge accumulation are the dominant forces to the emergence of the traits of wisdom, understanding and comprehension, with G-d's blessings.” ■



In preparation for this article, I was greatly assisted by Rabbis Shimon Gansburg, Shimon Sabol, and Shimon Simpson, as well as the Backman family—the matriarch, her daughters, and sons Chaim and Eli. With material from the archives of the National Committee for Furtherance of Jewish Education (NCFJE), Rebbe Responsa—whose app also made it much easier to navigate the Rebbe's correspondence with Mr. Stulman and Mr. Cowen, the archive of Rabbi Hirsch Chitrik (with thanks to R. Ari Chitrik) and the Library of Agudas Chassidei Chabad (with appreciation to Rabbis Yitzchok Wilhelm and Zalman Levine).

Sources: Igros Kodesh of the Rebbe Rayatz and the Rebbe, Toldos Chabad by Rabbi Dovber Levine, Articles by Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson in the Yiddishe Heim, reports by Dr. Nissan Mindel to the Rebbe Rayatz, Mr. Julius Stulman's books and speeches, Stephen Stulman's interview with Toldot Yisrael and historical newspaper clippings.

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