

THE STORY OF THE GREAT PARK MIKVAH

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Johannesburg, South Africa

Nine years had passed since the relocation of our shul from the inner city. The magnificent new building, which houses the almost-100-year-old furniture and fittings from the old shul, had facilitated a rejuvenation and rapid growth of the Great Park community in the Houghton Estate suburb of Johannesburg.

The community had gone through many changes and challenges of growth. And now, a dynamic group of young ladies, together with my wife Feige, was leading the cause to build a mikvah.

After weeks of planning and negotiations, we finally set a date for our first mikvah meeting: April 5, 2009, which also happened to be Yud Aleph Nissan, 5769. We embraced the hashgachah protis of the date of our first meeting, as a symbol of our connection to the Rebbe and the fulfillment of his mission to intensify Yiddishkeit in our corner of the world.

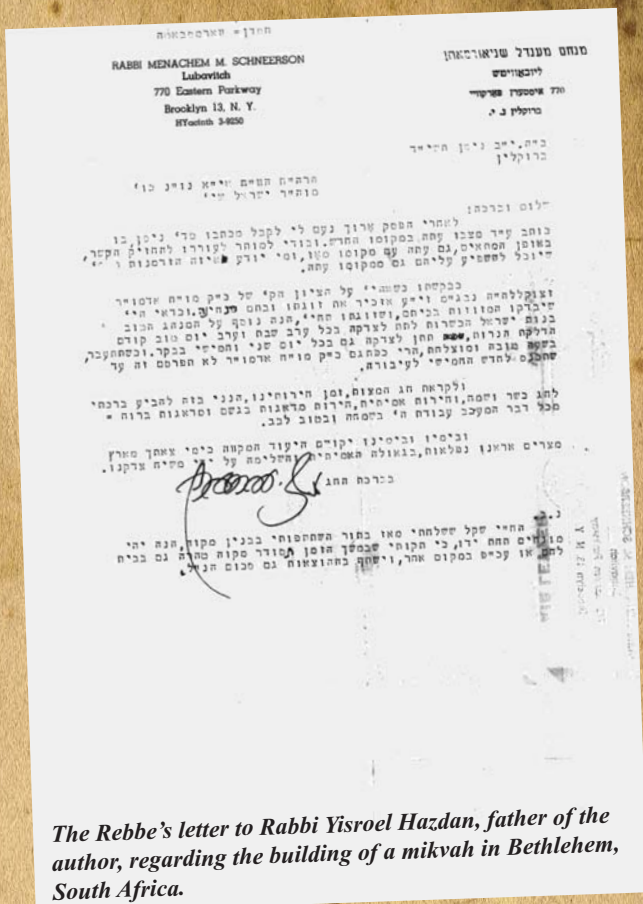
The Hayom Yom of 10 Nissan, the day preceding the meeting, reads as follows:

"On the subject of the campaign to popularize the observance of taharas hamishpachah in your community, ponder this deeply: let us imagine that G-d were to give you the opportunity to save a Jewish community from extinction (G-d forbid); you would certainly be willing to risk your life for this and you would thank and praise Him for His great kindness in offering you an opportunity of such enormous merit. The same then holds true to an even greater degree with regard to the campaign for taharas hamishpachah; it is an endeavor which literally saves lives."



*Tyrone and Wendy Zinman,
coordinators of the mikvah project.*

Artist's rendition of the soon-to-be completed mikvah building.



The Rebbe's letter to Rabbi Yisroel Hazdan, father of the author, regarding the building of a mikvah in Bethlehem, South Africa.

“The 18 dollars that I sent as participation in building a mikvah are to remain in your hands, since I hope that in time a mikvah will be organized in Bethlehem, or at least somewhere else. Then the aforementioned sum will be included in the expenses.”

The timing of the start of our journey was filled with potency and meaning.

Eighteen Dollars for the Mikvah

I was unable to attend the meeting as I was in Durban on a Torah Academy school trip. In the early hours of Sunday morning, I received a call from our son who had arrived home for Pesach. He had spent the night organizing the many letters that my father, Reb Yisroel Hazdan z”l, had received from the Rebbe.

He came across a letter of the Rebbe from 1954, regarding a proposed mikvah in the small town of Bethlehem, South Africa, where my father had been appointed as the Rov. The Rebbe included \$18 as his contribution to building the mikvah.

Before taking the post as rabbi in Bethlehem, my father had stipulated that the community needs to build a mikvah. Although the community had agreed to my father’s condition, they subsequently reversed the decision. The South African Jewish newspaper published a letter lambasting the ridiculous proposal to build what they termed a “useless and antiquated institution probably patronised by one or two isolated fanatics.”

The Bethlehem community wrote to the Chief Rabbi of South Africa, Rabbi Louis Rabinowitz, as well as to the Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Isaac Hertzog, to establish whether a mikvah was in fact a necessary requirement for their Jewish community. Both Chief Rabbis wrote powerful letters of support and motivation for the Bethlehem mikvah, which unfortunately failed to sway its opponents in the community.

In his letter, the Rebbe wrote, “The 18 dollars that I sent as participation in building a mikvah are to remain in your hands, since I hope that in time a mikvah will be organized in Bethlehem, or at least somewhere else. Then the aforementioned sum will be included in the expenses.”

Shortly after the community made the decision to abort the mikvah project, my father left his position in Bethlehem.

The words of the Rebbe: “... in Bethlehem or at least somewhere else” seemed to have relevance to our new Great Park mikvah project. The \$18 had been received but had not been used to build the mikvah in Bethlehem. A generation later, it was coming to fruition at Great Park in Johannesburg.

The night after the mikvah meeting, our family sat at the dinner table and reread the Rebbe’s letter. We were struck by the words, “... or at least somewhere else.” We read the words over and over.

I looked down to the bottom of the letter. The Rebbe concluded with the words: “Wishing a chag Pesach kosher v’sameach.” We looked at each other in amazement. Pesach was to begin that Wednesday night.

I looked up at the date on which the Rebbe wrote the letter

in 5714 (1954). It was written on the 12th of Nissan, 5714. Fifty-five years later, on the 11th of Nissan, 5769, our Great Park mikvah project was born.

My father passed away 20 years ago. As for the \$18 he received from the Rebbe, I am still looking for them!

Everlasting Life

As the Great Park mikvah was nearing completion, we began discussing a name. Wendy Zinman, one of the driving forces of our Great Park mikvah, approached me at the end of a Shabbat kiddush. She spoke with gentle strength – her voice soft but resolute.

“We embarked on this project just after the Jewish world reeled from the horrific events in Mumbai. In the face of tragic loss of life, we were determined to intensify, to grow, to add holiness and sanctity to our community through the building of our mikvah. Gabi and Rivky lost their lives while adding holiness to Am Yisroel. Would

it not be appropriate that our mikvah – dedicated to adding holiness to Am Yisroel – be named to honor their selfless dedication?”

In *Kuntres Uma'ayan* the Rebbe Rashab explains what it means to be “alive.” True life must be eternal. We are only truly alive when we connect to that which is eternal. “*Atem hadveikim Bashem Elokechem - Chayim kulchem hayom* - And you, who cleave to Hashem your G-d, are all alive today.”

A mikvah is designed so that a pool of regular water touches a pool of specially gathered pure living water and is thereby transformed. It becomes an extension of the living pure water by virtue of the connection.

Such is the case with every mitzvah that we perform. In one moment of connection to Hashem's Eternal Truth, we transform a limited human being into an extension of the Omnipotent; a finite moment into eternity.

With grateful thanks to our

tenacious project coordinator Tyrone Zinman, our mikvah has been built to meet the highest halachic requirements as well as the standards of the most luxurious spa. It has an extra large foyer which will be used to teach groups of women and senior high school girls about the significance of family purity and to introduce them to a magnificent mikvah.

Our community is blessed with a new mikvah in a gorgeous forest setting alongside our shul. It has threaded connections through time, through people and through space. It has touched and accessed the eternal bonds of Am Yisroel.

When you are in Johannesburg, please visit Ma'ayan Ganim, dedicated to the memory of Rivky and Gavriel Holtzberg, or visit us online at www.greatpark.co.za. An international Wall of Dedication and Remembrance will be included in the foyer. ■

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