

# Tefilla Notebook

This week's Tefilla Notebook is sponsored by **Sharon and Eli Gindi** in memory of Sharon's father, **Dennis Dweck, David Abraham ben Sofie Symbol z"l**, whose yahrtzeit is on 27 Iyyar.

25-26 Iyyar • Behar-Bechukotai • Birkat Hachodesh • 41st Day of the Omer

May 7-8, 2021

Steven Dorfman, President

Rabbi Pini Dunner, Senior Rabbi

Nati Bar-Am, Chazan



## SHABBAT SCHEDULE

### FRIDAY MAY 7TH

CANDLELIGHTING 7:23pm

FRIDAY NIGHT SERVICES 6:30pm

### SATURDAY, MAY 8TH

GEMARA SHIUR: 8:30AM

SHACHARIT 9:00AM

MINCHA 7:35pm

MAARIV 8:20pm

SHABBAT ENDS 8:27pm

## WEEKDAY DAVENING TIMES

Sunday 8:00am & 7:35pm

Mon- Thu 7:00am & 7:35pm

## WELCOME ELI BEER

Founder, United Hatzalah



Eli Beer is the Founder of United Hatzalah, Israel's pre-eminent rapid response EMS network made up of over 6000 volunteer medics who respond to more than 1800 calls daily anywhere in Israel, totally free of charge. Eli will speak after davening about the important work Hatzalah does and their role in the recent tragedy in Meron.

Kiddush this week is sponsored by **Joanne Sacks and Tuvia Ganz** in memory of Joanne's mother, **Sarah Chaya bat Aryeh Leib HaCohen a"h**, whose yahrtzeit is on 28 Iyar

## THANK YOU

**Sharon and Eli Gindi** for sponsoring the Rabbi's D'var Torah Video this week in memory of Sharon's father, **Dennis Dweck, David Abraham ben Sofie Symbol z"l**, whose yahrtzeit is on 27 Iyyar

Dear Members & Friends,

Adeeb Joudeh Al Hussein is a Muslim Arab living in the Old City of Jerusalem. Descended from one of Jerusalem's oldest Arab clans, Adeeb has a very important role: he is the official keyholder of Christianity's holiest site, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where many Christians believe Jesus was crucified and buried. This bizarre, centuries-old arrangement is the result of a history of endless feuding between competing Christian denominations about ownership and control of the site. While the tension does occasionally boil over into unholy brawls between hotheaded Christian clerics, the keyholder arrangement is accepted by all the Christian groups, and over the years has undoubtedly prevented total chaos at the shrine, or worse.

I have spent this past week agonizing over the fact that no such third-party arrangement has ever existed for Meron, the tiny Galilee village near Safed where second-century Talmudic sage and mystic Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai (Rashbi) is buried, and where 45 men and boys died in a stampede during the early hours of last Friday morning, as they departed an overcrowded Lag Ba'omer celebration.

Surprisingly, Meron was not included among the Jewish holy sites listed in the 1949 "Working Paper on the Holy Places" issued by the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine, which was a formal attempt by the UN to establish workable solutions to the explosive issues surrounding control and management of numerous religious holy sites in the Land of Israel. The reason it is surprising is because – as was noted by Professors Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell in their jointly authored book, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* – "from the thirteenth century [onwards], the most frequented pilgrim shrine for Jews in Palestine was at Meron in Galilee."

Most of us have only just discovered that the ownership and control of Meron is as fraught and tense as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre – indeed, it is worse, seeing as no meaningful arrangements or accommodations for Meron have ever been made or agreed upon between the competing interests – arrangements or accommodations that would have mitigated the huge increase in pilgrim numbers, particularly over the past 25 years, and might well have prevented the 45 deaths. Ultimate control over what happens in Meron is in the hands of a shadowy group known as the Va'adat Hachamisha ("committee of five"), although, to be frank, the outstanding characteristic of this group is not what they do, but rather what they do not do. In a moment, for your consideration, I will bring this group out of the shadows, but before I do that, let's do a bit of history.

The first person we know of who made the connection between Meron and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was a twelfth-century Jewish traveler by the name of Jacob ben Netanel HaCohen, who wrote a travel diary of his visit to the Holy Land. He mentions Rashbi's tomb in Meron and adds that his son Rabbi Eleazar is also buried there. Oddly enough, various other medieval pilgrims who authored travelogues and visited Meron – such as Benjamin of Tudela and Petachia of Regensburg – neither mention the tomb of Rashbi, nor that of his son – which, to be blunt, is a jarring omission.

For centuries, the Meron burial site and surrounding area was controlled by Musta'arabis – an ancient sect of Arabic-speaking Jews who were the predominant Jewish community of North Africa and the Near East until the Spanish expulsion of 1492, which resulted in the migration of large numbers of Ladino-speaking Sephardic Jews into areas previously dominated by Musta'arabis.

Long before the custom to visit Rashbi's tomb on Lag Ba'omer gained traction, the prevalent tradition was to visit the nearby tombs of Hillel and Shammai on Pesach Sheni. It is possible that pilgrims delayed their departure from Meron for a few days so that they could also commemorate Rashbi on Lag Ba'omer, the traditionally accepted date of his death – although, according to at least one opinion, Lag Ba'omer was actually Rashbi's wedding anniversary. The point is this: the Hillel and Shammai pilgrimage was considered far more important, as it included prayers for rain, a consequence of the fact that these rabbis' graves were associated with water-related miracles.

It was the Spanish (Sephardic) Jews who turned Meron, and specifically Rashbi's tomb, into a holy shrine. Immigrants from Spain brought a range of new customs to Eretz Yisrael, and one of them was that Meron is a place of spiritual transcendence. But truthfully, it was the sixteenth-century mystic Arizal who upped the ante and created the foundation for celebrating Lag Ba'omer in Meron, described by his devoted disciple, Rabbi Chaim Vital: "I saw my late teacher go once to Meron for Lag Ba'omer together with his entire household, and he remained there for three days."

The vexed question of who "owns" Meron, and specifically the tomb itself, is at the root of the problems that led to the tragedy last week. During the dying embers of Ottoman rule in the late nineteenth-century, control of Meron was officially put into the hands of the Sephardic community of Safed under the auspices of something called a hekdesch, which translates roughly as "non-profit" or "endowment". Even at that time ownership was already disputed, and some elements of the area were designated in the name of another hekdesch – the Ashkenazi community of Safed. Over time, these two groups split into four separate entities: two Sephardic and two Ashkenazi.

*Cont'd on next page*

After the establishment of the State of Israel, rather than interfere with this complicated arrangement, and bearing in mind that the annual pilgrimage to Meron was tiny by comparison to recent years, government authorities chose to let things remain as they were. Since then, various attempts have been made by Israel's Ministry of Religious Affairs and local civic authorities to upgrade the facilities so that Meron could accommodate the ever-increasing numbers of pilgrims on Lag Ba'omer, but the competing interests refused to agree to any major structural work.

Last Summer the Va'adat Hachamisha, which is made up of representatives of each hekdesch, along with Rabbi Shmuel Rabinovich, who is Israel's official rabbi of the Western Wall and other Jewish holy sites in Israel, announced that a lawyer, Eli Freund of Haifa, was taking over as the new CEO of the Meron shrine. But according to a senior local resident who I spoke to, Freund has rarely visited Meron, and his impact on the site has been non-existent. Rabbi Rabinovich is also unable to impose decisions on the site, even though he is chairman of the committee, as unlike Adeeb Joudeh Al Hussein, none of the competing "owners" recognizes his authority, nor that of the Israeli government.

One of the two Ashkenazi groups is headed by Rabbi Avrohom Frohlich – the former proprietor of a Judaica auction house in Jerusalem who closely associates himself with the Brisk community in Jerusalem, a group that utterly rejects the State of Israel's legitimacy. Purportedly, he is the most stubborn of them all. But he is closely followed in his inflexibility and refusal to consider any changes to Meron's infrastructure by his Ashkenazi counterpart, Rabbi Mordechai Dov Hacohen Kaplan, son of Safed's late chief rabbi, Rabbi Avraham Simcha Hacohen Kaplan; Rabbi Dovid Derli of Tiberias, who heads one of the two Sephardic endowments; and Rabbi Matityahu Shrem, the head of the other Sephardic *hekdesch*, who lives in Rechasim, a neighborhood adjacent to Kfar Hasidim. It is worth noting that none of these four men – not one of them! – actually lives in Meron. It is also worth noting that not one of them, to my knowledge, has issued a statement since the tragedy occurred, not even to offer condolences to the families who lost their loved ones.

I should add that over the years these four individuals have been ably assisted in their intransigence by a senior haredi government official: Rabbi Yosef Shvinger, director of the National Center for Holy Places in Israel and a close confidant of Rabbi Aryeh Deri, head of the Sephardic Shas political party and Israel's Interior Minister, who served almost two years of a three-year sentence for corruption between 2000 and 2002. In 2018, Shvinger publicly declared: "Every year I end up in a confrontation with the police [regarding Meron] because I tell them that I am unable to fulfill all the requirements they are demanding." Just to be clear, those requirements are not cosmetic – they relate to the health and safety of hundreds of thousands of pilgrims. In any event, the outcome of his stubbornness and refusal to cooperate, the same attitude as that of those who represent the four endowments, crystallized last week in the horrific stampede and deaths that shocked us all to our core.

You may be wondering why I am going on the record to publicize details and information about these people that almost no one else has been willing to do. It's very simple. Every day this week I have been getting one or more emails informing me either that we have no right to suggest that this tragedy was anything other than an act of God, or that this tragedy happened because of some deficiency on our part, whether regarding morality, devotion to Torah study, modesty, or some other ideal that we should all aspire to.

To be perfectly honest, I have no idea why this terrible event happened, nor whether any of these lofty theological proposals carry any weight. The one thing I do know is that what happened in Meron last Friday wasn't a hurricane or an earthquake – rather it happened as a result of human negligence. And just as Pharaoh was punished for perpetrating the horrific ill-treatment of Jews in Egypt, despite the fact that the Egyptian slavery was decreed by God centuries earlier, so too, those who bear responsibility for the conditions that resulted in 45 deaths in Meron don't get off the hook by slipping under the radar, nor by claiming amnesty because it only happened as a result of God's decree. And let me add this, for good measure – if we are not willing to hold these people accountable, then it is not only they who are guilty, but we are guilty too.

Rabbi Moshe Sofer of Pressburg (1762-1839), esteemed author of the *Chatam Sofer* commentary on the Torah, identifies an unusual anomaly at the end of Parshat Behar. The portion takes us on a curious journey, from discussing the laws of *shemitta* ("sabbatical year") to the sale of articles and real estate, indentured servants, and eventually laws regarding the redemption of a Jew who has become enslaved to a gentile. The thread that runs through these topics seems to concern someone who slips into sin by starting off ignoring *shemitta*, then, desperate for money, selling his belongings and eventually his real estate, ultimately going into servitude and even ending up in slavery. But the Torah then segues into a series of seemingly unrelated instructions, regarding idolatry and Shabbat, beginning with (Lev. 26:1): לא תעשו לכם אילים - "don't make idols for yourselves."

Rashi suggests that despite the lack of any obvious connection with what precedes it, these instructions relate to the Jewish slave. The nature of a person is to be influenced by what is going on around him, and he might therefore say, "since my master is a free spirit, I will be like him; since my master worships idols, I will be like him; since my master breaks the laws of Sabbath, I will be like him." That is why we must make every effort to free him. The *Chatam Sofer* stunningly takes this notion a step further – the instruction regarding idols is written in the plural, not singular, because if we allow that person to descend into sin and do nothing, his sin is on us.

The idea of collective sin is well-established in Jewish law. When we enable sinners among us, or airbrush their sin out of the narrative, we all become complicit in their sin – in other words, it is not just their sin, it is our sin too. Particularly if those who sin are a part of our faith community – namely they publicly declare fealty to Torah and Mitzvot – and yet they refuse to acknowledge they have done anything wrong, we are dutybound to dissociate ourselves from their wrongdoing or we have become co-conspirators in their transgressions.

What happened last week in Meron is painful enough without adding insult to injury. We must, all of us, do everything that we can to ensure that those who had a hand in this dreadful disaster do not escape any justice that is due. Otherwise, we are no better than them.

Wishing you a Shabbat Shalom and a great week ahead, *Rabbi Pini Dunner*



# Sisterhood Corner

May

Wishing you a happy and relaxing  
Mother's Day!

## Coming Soon!

Shavuot Classes at YINBH  
Sunday, May 16th classes  
beginning at 9:30pm

A Dessert Bar offering Magnolia's  
cheesecake will be available  
between classes!

Visit [beverlyhillssynagogue.org](http://beverlyhillssynagogue.org) for  
details & registration

## Annual YINBH Gala

This year's annual Gala will mark the  
full reopening of our synagogue!

Thursday, June 17th

Visit [www.bhsbanquet.com](http://www.bhsbanquet.com)

Happy Yom Yerushalayim!

Chodesh Sivan Tov!  
& Shabbat Shalom,

Cecile & Ruthie  
Sisterhood Co-Presidents

Mazel Tov to our member Franck  
Ruimy who came in 2nd at the  
Ferrari Challenge in Sonoma  
county.



# TEEN MINYAN

WITH CHAZZAN NATI BARAM  
SHABBAT DAY  
MAY 8TH AT 10AM

## TEEN MINYAN IS BACK!

Teen led services and participation  
*in the shul patio*



Followed by a *teen only*  
kiddush to-go catered by  
Jeff's Gourmet

Sponsorship welcome

RSVP to [office@yinbh.org](mailto:office@yinbh.org)  
to attend

**YINBH**  
BEVERLY HILLS SYNAGOGUE

## YAHRTZEITS

**Benjamin Pavker**  
Baruch ben Shlomo Leib z"l  
Grandfather of  
**Stephen Rothman**  
Yahrtzeit - 26 Iyar

**Sylvia Samson**  
Shayna bat Aryeh Leib a"h  
Mother of  
**Lee Samson**  
Yahrtzeit - 26 Iyar

**Dennis Dweck**  
David Abraham ben Sofie Symbol z"l  
Father of  
**Sharon Gindi**  
Yahrtzeit - 27 Iyar

**Sarah Chaya bat Aryeh  
LeibHaCohen a"h**  
Mother of  
**Joanne Sacks**  
Yahrtzeit - 28 Iyar

**Mel Gross**  
Moshe z"l  
Father of  
**Jeff Gross**  
Yahrtzeit - 29 Iyar



*Ava Brenner  
Behrouz Soroudi  
Joseph Baum  
Karen Parver  
Sonya Kest*

## MAZAL TOV

**Yardena and Gil  
Goldstein** on the  
birth of a baby girl.  
Mazal Tov to great-  
grandfather,  
**Lee Samson**; to  
grandparents  
**Dani & Rivkie  
Samson**; and to big  
sister **Anaelle**

YINBH BEVERLY HILLS SYNAGOGUE  
PRESENTS

# YINBH GALA BANQUET

A COMMUNITY CELEBRATION

marking the full re-opening of our  
synagogue and the resilience of our  
community over the past year

THURSDAY, JUNE 17

HONORING



Rabbi  
Pini Dunner

Chazzan  
Nati Baram

IN PERSON & VIRTUAL

PRIVATE HOME IN BEVERLY HILLS  
ADDRESS PROVIDED UPON RSVP

[www.bhsbanquet.com](http://www.bhsbanquet.com)