

Giant of the Spirit

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The terror and intimidation faced by those who wished to give their children a Jewish education in Communist Russia is hard for us to imagine. What could be wrong with teaching a child about his heritage? Sadly, to the communists, educating children in any religion was a serious offense. At any moment, one could be taken in for “questioning” and never be seen again. Those who were lucky enough to survive often had to serve years in prison or work camps for their “crimes.”

Reb Herschel Tepliker remained in Uman until he fully absorbed the Breslov path and made it his own. Eventually he visited Rav Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn of Lubavitch. When the rebbe noticed the embers of Reb Herschel’s pure desire to help

others, he charged him with the task of creating an underground *cheder* (religious school) in Polonoye.

Reb Herschel was very successful at this task, finding qualified teachers and eluding the hawk-eyed glare of the authorities. Later, when Reb Herschel found himself in the same city as the Lubavitcher rebbe, he paid him a visit.

The usual procedure was for visitors to write their personal request on a note, which the *gabbai* presented to the rebbe. Reb Herschel explained that he was not well-educated at all—he had never even finished *cheder*! Although he knew the Hebrew letters, he didn't know how to write in proper Hebrew, and could only express his desires in pidgin-Yiddish. When the *gabbai* saw that the note was barely legible, he offered to read it to the rebbe.

Both were astounded by the contents of this unschooled man's note. It was the first petition the rebbe had received in a very long time that made no mention of physical needs. The rebbe and his *gabbai* marveled at Reb Herschel's exclusive concern with the needs of his soul. What had transformed this simple man into a giant of the spirit, who only asked the rebbe for help in increasing his faith, without uttering a single plea for help in surviving the deprivation and dangers of the times?

Based on Siach Sarfey Kodesh VII, 230b