

BH.

# Ohel Prep

## Attached Articles:

### 1) Nissan Gordon's Article "At the Ohel"

describes how the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe (1880-1950) touched 3 types/generations of Chassidim and how each of them sees their Rebbe in a different light as they visit his resting place and continue to connect with him.

### 2) "Hergeishim"

personal feelings about writing to the Rebbe at the Ohel.

### 3) Find a Zalman Zlatopolsky Bench Near You

is an article on Chabad.org by Mendel Rubin about the paradoxical balance of yearning and continued connection after a Rebbe's passing.

### 4) From Chaslavitch to Lubavitch

are musings I wrote about a well-known Chassidic painting by Zalman Kleinman, a Chassidic Norman Rockwell, as it relates to journeying to the Rebbe's Ohel.

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## Some things to know. No particular order.

**Customary Observances include:** writing the letter, of course. removing leather shoes, give some Tzedakah, some light a candle ("for the candle of G-d is the soul of man"), saying Tehillim or the Maaneh Lashon, quietly reading the letter, tearing up the letter and placing at the Ohel, many try to walk out backwards as sign of respect. Many also stop to visit the gravesites of the Chabad Rebbetzins buried opposite (and Rebbetzin Chana, a bit further down) from the Ohel. Some also stop at gravesites nearby they particularly feel connected to. When returning inside you wash hands as you would in the morning.

**Semi-Rituals that developed:** the cookie and hot beverage station, the video in the adjoining house, people milling about, learning or praying, the engagements, those who spend Shabbos there occasionally.

**Individual Experience:** Just as in his lifetime, where the Rebbe cherished each and every person and connected to people on different level and in different ways, same is true today. Not everyone feels the same feelings at the Ohel, some feel very little, for some its tremendously uplifting. The same as would be with any Jewish experience - be it Simchat Torah, a Passover Seder or Meron on Lag B'Omer, or various areas of Torah study (say Halacha vs. mysticism - not that they have to be VS.)

**Slice of Jewish Life:** Just as by the Dollars Line etc, you don't have to be a Chabad Chassid to come. Stay at the Ohel long enough, and come at varied times and you will find Jews of all walks of life, levels of observance, and varied community.

**Good News, too!** Many people, in his lifetime and today, come to the Rebbe with their problems and issues. Mailsacks would be filled with stress. The Rebbe, and Rebbes before him as well, asked that people also share good news, accomplishments, positives, so it not only be problems. The Rebbe read each letter, answered each one.

**Connect with an Action:** The Rebbe always emphasized to connect with a practical Mitzvah - in fact, Chassidus reads Mitzvah to mean connection more than commandment. Make a Vessel for Blessing!

**HISTORICAL NOTE:** The author of this piece was Nissan Gordon, a gifted Yiddish writer, from an old Chabad family. He wrote it after the passing of the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef-Yitzchak Schneerson (1880-1950). It is the very same Ohel as the (our) Rebbe, R' Menachem Mendel (1902-2004) for they are interned alongside each other, surrounded by the same Ohel edifice. The Previous Rebbe was famous for his tremendous personal self-sacrifice and the actual self-sacrifice he instilled in his Chassidim to keep Judaism alive under the communists.

**PERSONAL NOTE:** My father (Rabbi Israel Rubin) translated this article, as it helps one appreciate "being at the Ohel". For me, this article helped create the imagery that being at the Ohel is a 'meeting of the souls' providing opportunities of connection to the Rebbe, despite the obvious physical barriers, through memories, through one's thoughts, an uplifting of spirit. It shares the connection and yearning of 3 different Chassidim with 3 different experiences and connections.

# At the Ohel

**T**he big, bustling city of New York lay paralyzed, covered with snow and ice. Try as it may, a heavy snow storm had immobilized millions of New Yorkers and locked them in their homes. Even the constantly rushing Sambatyon river of traffic, cars and trucks which never know any rest, had come to a complete standstill.

**O**n this quiet snowbound day, something came to life on an old Long Island Jewish cemetery. Something so high and lofty that it can only be defined as the eternal life of a Tzaddik. Hundreds of Jews from many walks of life braved the freezing weather, coming from far and near, old and young, to warm themselves by the resting place of the most fiery religious personality of our turbulent era of Jewish history.

The freezing cold and deep snow could not prevent these Jews from coming out on Yud Shvat to visit the Ohel of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Reb Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson ob"m, to unite with his memory and stand face to face with his unforgettable holy image on his yartzeit. They came to renew the deep bonds that join their souls here below with his soul on High by reciting chapters of Psalms and words of Zohar.

A piece of Heaven descended between the four granite walls surrounding the Rebbe's tomb, the Rebbe who is known in Jewish history as "the Rebbe of Mesiras Nefesh." The spirit of Rabbi Shimon Ben Yochai, his friends and students breathes here through their mystical sayings about the tzaddik who cannot rest even in Gan Eden when his flock suffers from tzoros on earth.

Who can appreciate the inner warmth felt when souls meet and fill the void with mysterious secrets about life, death and all of creation? Who is bothered by the exter-

nal cold, when standing near those snow covered letters on the tall tombstone, which tear at the heart and open a new wound with the unbelievable reality: "Here lies the Holy Ark..."

It is quiet, silence in every corner. All is quiet except for the deep cry that pierces the heavens, reaching way up to the Holy Throne above. A cry that says everything in only one word - "Rebbe!!"

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People hold a "maaneh lashon" in their hands and whisper words of prayer with fervor. But words themselves cannot say it all. Many stand numb, with closed eyes,

trying to remember those special feelings and words they heard from the Rebbe in his lifetime.

Here stands an older Chassid, one of many legendary soldiers from the unsung Lubavitch revolution under the crushing Soviet regime. He stands here next to the silvery snow tomb, but his thoughts go back to another time in another country. He remembers the Rebbe's visit to Russia during the heat of the Yevsektzia's vicious attacks against Yiddishkeit.

The Lubavitch Shul, the only one left in Moscow, was illuminated that Purim, as if the hated Yevsektzia doesn't exist. But it is a Mitzva to rejoice on Purim. The Rebbe is visiting from Leningrad, and will say Chassidus tonight. The shul is packed. The crowd includes undercover GPO agents. But the Rebbe sits and declares:

"Be aware, dear Jews! Let us emulate the strength of Jews in that generation, who resisted Haman's evil decrees... Their source of strength were the 22,000 children with whom Mordechai

learned Torah. The children said to Mordechai: 'we are with you in life and death'... these children were victorious over Haman and his wickedness."

Yes. The Russian Chassid remembers that evening in Moscow very well. Chassidim had already been threatened by Litvakov's warnings that the Yevsektzia will not tolerate such activity. People tried to dissuade the Rebbe from talking publicly

that night. But "Mordechai will not kneel or bow." No, it is right before Purim, there is nothing to fear! The Rebbe's voice grew even stronger: "This spiritual war is eternal and repeats itself in every generation and every place.... by supporting Torah study of little children, we will definitely win!"

Two hot tears roll down his eyes, focused on the little mound near the monument....

In another corner of the Ohel, here by the wall, near a stubborn Yartzeit candle that refuses to be extinguished by wind or storm, stands a young man with a blond

beard. He looks at the yartzeit candle that fights heroically for its life- just like the Rebbe.

In his mind's eye he sees the Rebbe in the Leningrad train station, as the Rebbe left for exile to faraway Kastrama.

Despite the obvious danger to anyone associated with the Rebbe, the station quickly filled up with Jews who bid farewell to the last general of a once proud Russian Jewry. The Rebbe, chained and surrounded by a heavy guard of Russian police with ready fire-arms, suddenly turned to the crowd and said:

" Only our bodies can be exiled. Only our bodies, not our souls. Regarding Torah and Mitzvos, we are under no foreign rule. No force on earth can change this. With the old stubbornness of an ancient people, and with the strength of mesiras nefesh of all our previous generations, I cry out: "Don't touch my anointed, and don't harm my prophets."

This young man with the blond beard was raised in one of the underground yeshivos, for which the Rebbe nearly paid with his life. He fully understands today the meaning of the Rebbe's declaration on the

Leningrad platform. "Only our body is in Exile, but no nation can control our ne-shama!

"Jews! You are so dear to me.."

Here is a Chassid "after Russia," a little Americanized, standing like a soldier with a "maaneh lashon" in hand, saying: "shalom aleichem adonenu morenu verabenu." He remembers the Rebbe from a visit to a small town in Kresen in 1934. He hears the Rebbe's voice:

" Jews, I love you! The trials and dangers of my communal work during the War, and later in times of hunger, need, and persecution, allow me to say: "Jews, you are so very dear to me!"

Only a few years have passed since this great Jewish leader passed away, and see, how alien such words of true Jewish love sound in our society. The Rebbe loved every Jew unconditionally with a boundless love; it demanded his own suffering for Jews and Judaism. He was a great zealot, but also a great Ohev Yisroel, a rare combination that is so hard to find these days.

Among the Chassidim standing by his tomb, we see many of the last souls whom he introduced to Torah: the American Jewish youth.

It seems just recently that the Rebbe was helped on a wheel chair from the *Drottingholm* on Adar II 9, 1940 in the Port of New York. What a fire of warmth and loving kindness this physically ailing, but mighty

spiritual hero had kindled in 10 years, changing forever the cold and indifferent American Jewish scene!

This pillar of fire appeared in its full glory in a cold winter day between the four walls of the tomb where he rests. A pillar of fire that connects Heaven and earth and kindles the light to be "higher than the world, within the world."

The congregation of Jews gathered around the tomb of the Rebbe have their own Chazan. He is their Shliach Tzibbur and leader, who stands for hours in solemn prayer His lips move barely, but no voice is heard.

This chazan is the most loyal chasid to the Rebbe. He always looked up to him with the same unfaltering faith as Israel did to Moshe as they crossed the Red Sea when "they believed in Hashem and his servant Moshe." He has now become the Rebbe's spiritual successor, continuing the golden chain that extends from Liozna through Liadi, Lubavitch and Rostov until Brooklyn.

Who can imagine the unity of such great souls from the same holy source, one continues where the other left off. Who knows how high their thoughts reach and how deep every feeling penetrates? He may be asking the Rebbe to help him continue the mesiras nefesh soaked spiritual heritage; to lead the Chassidim who see in him now what they saw in the Previous Rebbe.

His lips move in prayer for the thousands of Jews, whose names are sent to him literally from all corners of the world, from the Sahara Desert in Africa to a little town deep in the American South, where a Lubavitch Shaliach has worked hard and toiled, finally to plant a seed of faith. Every name involves joy and sorrow, hope and despair. Each is a world to itself.

Like a Chazan standing Shmone Esray, the Rebbe Shlita stands silently by the tomb of his own Rebbe, glancing at the hundreds of names. In front of him, the tomb covered with white snow is mixed with torn kvitlach papers with the hopes and prayers that people have just read here today.

Each few minutes, the wind lifts another piece of torn paper and carries it on its wings on High. A new torn kvitel falls on the white snow and fills in the empty space vacated by its predecessor. The 'Chazzan' escorts each flying kvitel with his glance, and each new request of "Rachamim rabim mimkor harachamim Vehachasadim Hamityim ."

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When the sun was about to set, a piece of Heaven descended between the granite walls. The Heavens lifted, taking along with them a consecrated piece of earth that rose that day into Heaven.

*translated from the Yiddishe Heim* •

**ANOTHER PERSONAL NOTE:** In 1991 I spent six months studying in Kiryat Gat, Israel, far from the Jewish centers of Jerusalem or Tzfat. Being an American student I was often granted "weekends off" and I spent many of them wandering through Israel's north, finding and visiting the gravesites of the righteous, mostly the Rabbis of the Mishna. After years of Talmud study these names mean a great deal. Rabbi Akiva, Hillel, R' Yochanon ben Zakkai... at each gravesite one naturally thinks of the specific Talmudic and life teachings one learned in their name. And their life stories, too. For who can go to Rabbi Akiva's Ohel atop a mountain in Teveria, and not reflect on the story and messages of his life? And so with all the Rabbis. All this hit home to me, many hundreds-fold, at the Rebbe's Ohel. Of course, all holy places are opportune places to pray, to spiritually connect. But this is different. This is a Rebbe who knew our generation, who loved its Jews, every last Jew, who did so much for them. He understood us, who had such a tremendous vision of Jews and Judaism, specifically for our times, he cared for us, he inspired and encouraged us, in so many direct and indirect ways. So among all holy sites, there is a unique relevance, a unique connection - at least this is how I feel. And I feel so, inspired by how Nissan Gordon in the article above describes how Chassidim of the 1950's and 1960's felt at the Ohel of the Rebbe's father-in-law, the Previous Rebbe.

**YET ANOTHER PERSONAL NOTE:** In the article Nissan Gordon refers to the Rebbe as a "Shliach Tzibur" (Chazan) leading the community of the faithful in prayer at the Ohel of his father-in-law. I think a little background might be helpful here.

Ever since his father-in-law's passing and his later assumption of leadership, the Rebbe often came here to pray. He would stand for hours, reading notes and letter of personal and communal issues that people wrote to the Rebbe, from a large paper bag (and in later years numerous large paper bags), and the Rebbe would read each note, sometimes cry, and then tear-up the notes (they're torn for privacy purposes) and place it into the concrete basin over the grave.

By the way, the notes accumulate, you can look down and see letters typed and written, in languages from Hebrew to Portuguese, in adult cursive and child's writing, every few days or perhaps weeks, depending on time of the year, they are cleaned out and burned in a Franklin-stove type oven behind the Ohel.

Talking about the Rebbe emotional about notes in paper-bags, I have a very vivid memory. On Rosh Hashanah, the Rebbe would blow the Shofar. 770 was jammed with people, literally. Older folks had seats in the bench areas, but most Yeshiva students crammed a giant area in front of the Bimah. It was called "the washing machine" because it turned and churned, and steam and sweat rose from it. Now that I've been 11 years in UAlbany I can say it was a giant mosh-pit with no elbow room. The pressure and pushing was incredibly intense. (BTW - somehow the physical exertion has its positive spiritual ramifications, but that's a different story). But when the Rebbe ascended, such a hush fell, an internal silence. The Rebbe would put many of this big paper bags on the Bima, all filled with people's issues, problems and challenges. He would spread his Tallis over all of them and he would cry (the Rebbe hardly cried publicly, especially in his later years) and then he would begin the ceremony to blow the Shofar. So without getting into the description of the pesukim leading up to Shofar and the Shofar blowing itself - I wanted to share how the cry of the Shofar rose up out of all those letters.

And how Nissan Gordon writes that "every name... is a world to itself." This was so exemplified by the Rebbe. Repeatedly in his teachings is the power of each individual Jew, how each and every Jew, no matter their circumstance is so precious to G-d, how every Jew is family. The Rebbe rarely referred to the Jewish People as the Jewish People. More often he would say (in Yiddish) each Jew and every Jew.

I feel so blessed to have had the opportunity to grow up by the Rebbe, to have stood at countless of his farbrengens. And so foolish for not understanding more, absorbing better, for not taking advantage as I should. But certain things you could not help but absorb. A stone could absorb it - it was so consistent, so passionate, so emphasized, the Rebbe's view of a Jew, was one of those things that got hammered inside you.

Oh, and about the Notes. Basically, I write them as I wrote letters to the Rebbe in his lifetime. Well, that's not exactly true.

When the Rebbe was alive, this letter-writing for me (and others) was a whole process. Almost like writing a paper, but a gut-wrenching, inner reflecting, most personal paper. I started off with a long page, and slowly, gradually, through self-reflection, attempt at personal honesty, soul-searching priorities, narrowed it down to a few lines pregnant and weighted with personal meaning. It is remarkable, those times that I got responses, they were short, concise and captured the whole point. The Rebbe read me.

The famous letter in Tanya (Igeret HaKodesh 27) written after the passing of Rebbe Mendel Hordoker, explains how after a Tzadik's passing the connection only deepens, and now that the physical is no longer a barrier, it is even greater and more accessible than it was in physical life.

I actually feel that somehow. Now I write to the Rebbe without any inhibition. I write often, I write long, I try and share with the Rebbe many more things that I would have before Gimmel Tammuz (his yartzeit). And although I can not receive direct answers anymore, we find that the Rebbe does answer us, somehow. The answer comes. The Rebbe comes through for us. And also, or perhaps just as important, by writing to the Rebbe, things are different in myself.

When I was a Yeshiva student we used to be ashamed to write to the Rebbe about physical needs. I married in 1996, after the Rebbe's passing. I do not know how I would write to the Rebbe (in his lifetime) as a married man, but now as a married man, I understand (as the Rebbe taught many times) that our physical and spiritual worlds are intertwined and our physical lives and needs are spiritual as well.

This is an eclectic, random, personal thoughts, and by no means an authoritative guide or preparation for the Ohel. Bit in the next few days I wanted to try and share certain things, since you told me how important preparation is to you. It is indeed a Chassidic value! Stories are told of the lengthy personal preparations of elder Chassidim. I don't even know if you will have the time to read all this. And perhaps there are more important things I am missing out on sharing.

So this is a farbrengen of sorts. Informal, unofficial and personal.

# Zalman Kleinman's "From Chaslavitch to Lubavitch"

and Mendel Rubin's Notes



Going to the Ohel is a current form of "traveling to the Rebbe". Zalman Kleinman's "From Chaslavitch to Lubavitch" painting is a commentary on that uplifting spiritual journey.

Zalman Kleinman's art is a walk down memory lane in Chassidic nostalgia. He lived and worked in Crown Heights, but had fond memories and visions of the elder Chassidim and vividly painted them into his works, filled with warmth and meaningful expression. All his "Chassidim" resemble actual people. Even I knew some of them.

The basic concept of the flying wagon is based on a Yiddish expression, "shtayen a tefach hecher" to stand one tefach (biblical measure of a hand's

width) above the earth. Not to let "earthliness" define you, to rise above it, even just by a little. Going to the Rebbe, afforded that spiritual opportunity. In the language of Chassidus, it is "Yechudah Eelah" (the transcending upper unity) vs. "Yechudah Ta'atah" (the encompassing lower unity). The latter is all about finding G-dliness within our lowly world (the purpose of Creation according to Chassidus) and the former is about transcending and rising above our world. Kuntres Eitz HaChaim (by Rabbi Shalom Ber, the fifth Chabad Rebbe) describes why both approaches and perspectives are necessary (though most of our lives and mission is doing the lower level) and how they compliment each other. His book of "Eter" (5670) discusses it at greater length, and that is something I studied with great enjoyment as a Yeshiva student and now in my married, working life, I struggle and endeavor to connect with it and apply it.

Two things stand out for me in his commentary of a Chassid's journey, the strenuous effort by the horse to lift the wagon heavenward, and the contrast of the muddle of the Shtetl versus the luminous clarity of the heavens.

In the painting, the struggle of the horse seems separate and distant from the joyous Chassidim toasting each other L'chaim inside the wagon. I see it however, as the horse within, our animalistic soul and the struggle to rise heavenward. It is a struggle because in fighting (emotional) gravity the horse has to dig his feet in (see painting) and push hard to get away from below. Tanya 15 and 30 and a great many later texts talk about "Avodah" the service of G-d (mentioned in Ethics of Our Fathers as one of three pillars) and the strenuous efforts it entails.

The clarity factor I realized after the Rebbe's passing. One of the things I miss most about the Rebbe was his clarity, and how he helped us get some of that clarity. Even now as I study the Rebbe's teachings, I get the ideas, their beauty, their meaning, their application, but miss some of the clarity. In Chassidic or Kabbalah talk this would refer to the "seeing" that is only available in Chochma. In Yiddish they call it an "Uplaig" an underlying premise, the bedrock foundation. I'm having trouble sharing this properly, I have to give it some more thought. But I think that Kleinman was portraying this in his luminous clear heavens. They are not clouded (though he has clouds, they are not darkened) by "self".

## Find a Zalman Zlatopolsky Bench Near You

By Mendel Rubin

I don't read music, but I love chassidic melodies, as well as the stories behind them. The pages of musical notes in *Sefer HaNiggunim*<sup>1</sup> are interspersed with biographical information, anecdotes and inspiration. I was leafing through this book in my teen years, and a short story about Reb Zalman Zlatopolsky's *niggun* (chassidic melody) caught my attention because of its rich imagery. Its meaning wasn't especially relevant to me at the time, but it left its imprint. Years later this story, both its words and imagery, continues to uplift, reassure and inspire me.

Some historical background might be helpful. Three generations of Chabad rebbes are involved in this story: the Rebbe Maharash (1834–1882), who was the fourth Lubavitcher rebbe; his son, the Rebbe Rashab (1860–1920), the fifth rebbe; and his grandson, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak (1880–1950), the sixth rebbe, also known as the Previous Rebbe, or the Frierdiker Rebbe.

The story happened in 1885, several years after the passing of the Rebbe Maharash. The setting was Menton, a scenic seashore resort town in the French Riviera, which served as a place for quiet reflection and writing for the Rebbe Rashab.

The Freirdiker Rebbe told this story at least twice:<sup>2</sup>

In 5671 (1911) I was with my father, the Rebbe Rashab, in Menton, France. Once, while we were walking along the seashore, amidst that glorious scenic setting, my father showed me a bench nestled in the brambles, between the sea and the forest. My father recalled that years earlier, in 5645 (1885), three years after his father the Rebbe Maharash's passing, he was walking along this stretch in Menton and came upon the chassid, R. Zalman Zlatopolsky, sitting on this very same bench, deep in thought. His eyes closed and filled with tears, he sang the chassidic melody associated with his name with great devotion. My father, the rebbe, did not want to disturb this chassid's reverie. R. Zalman sat on that bench, singing and crying, deep in thought, for hours on end. My father told me, "The sight of Reb Zalman reflects the life-yearning of a chassid, one who physically lost his rebbe a number of years ago; but spiritually his rebbe stands right before him!"

Later on, my father asked him which chassidic teaching was going through his mind while sitting on that bench. Zalman wasn't an especially emotional person, but he burst out in tears and had trouble catching his breath. He told my father which specific *maamar* (chassidic discourse) it was, and when he had heard it from the Rebbe Maharash. (That is what he was thinking of—and reliving!—while singing that melody.)

(Listen to Reb Zalman's melody here:)

comment (0) send link

“The life-yearning of a chassid . . .” A physical loss and a spiritual continuum. A palpable presence, and a yearning caused by a void. Conflicting emotions and experiences that are both true, that in some ways even support and complement each other. This paradoxical description by a rebbe of a chassid from a hundred years past gave expression to the internal struggle many of us experienced after the passing of the Rebbe on Gimmel Tammuz, the 3rd of Tammuz, 1994. It encapsulated, in one sentence, many of the rich chassidic sentiments and perspectives found in the Rebbe’s uplifting and reassuring talks of 1950 after the passing of his father-in-law, the Friediker Rebbe. It brought to life the words of the Zohar quoted at the end of Tanya, chapter 34, that it is honest, normal and healthy to have “crying lodged in one side of the heart, yet joy in the other.”

These few words, so pregnant with meaning, gave me much strength when I was a *yeshivah* student in my twenties grappling with the great loss of the Rebbe’s passing alongside a continued, ever-deepening spiritual connection to him.

But it wasn’t until I was raising children that I appreciated the bench. The visual of the Rebbe Rashab revisiting that bench 26 years later, pointing it out and sharing the vivid memory with his son, helps me give my own children a sense of the same experience.

Now and then, in outings with our children, we come across a park bench that meets the criteria of the story of Reb Zalman Zlatopolsky. It is set off to the side, alone near the banks of a lake or river, in a quiet clearing surrounded by trees. My kids know that we call that kind of bench “a Zalman Zlatopolsky bench.” We stop to sit, say the 12 Torah passages that the Rebbe urged children to say, sing a *niggun* or two, and recall the Rebbe Rashab’s words about a chassid who sits on bench like this: *A chassid may have lost his rebbe physically, but spiritually the Rebbe is right before us.*

Indeed, the Rebbe continues to be very much present in our lives.

## FOOTNOTES

1. A three-volume set of books recording many of the melodies that were composed and/or sung by Chabad rebbes and chassidim. The lion’s share of collecting and writing down these melodies was done by Rabbi Shmuel Zalmanov (1904–1975) at the behest of the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn, and with the encouragement of the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneersohn, of righteous memory. The third volume was released after Rabbi Zalmanov’s passing.
2. On the 13th of Tammuz 5692 (1932), and also on Shabbat Chol HaMoed Sukkot in 5706 (1945).