



# From Berdichev to Washi

*The recently renovated ohel of the Kedushas Levi*

BY  
MOYSHE  
SILK



# ington

With the message of the  
**Kedushas Levi**

It all started in a small red Lada in Ukraine in the summer of 1995.

Think of a Ford Fiesta with even less rear legroom! The Soviet Lada first appeared in 1973. It was an odd mix of Soviet box sedan design with technology licensed from Fiat. Initial development costs for the car were around \$2 billion. It doesn't appear that a penny of that was spent on backseat comfort.

I was wedged in the backseat with my knees nearly pinned to my chest for hours at a go. We were on a mission. Some people take exotic vacations in the French Riviera, the Seychelles, or, perhaps, Machu Picchu. My friends at work found it odd that I, and so many of my Orthodox Jewish friends, called a good vacation searching out rabbis in the remotest parts of the world. And dead ones at that! Who goes to Eastern Europe, Israel or Morocco to go visit cemeteries? Jews do. It's in our DNA, and it's our way of showing continued and ongoing respect for our departed. It's our way of staying connected.

Thus started my 30-year journey to present a readable and accessible translation of the complete chasidic classic *Kedushas Levi*. Here follows a chronicle of that journey from the backseat of that Lada through Ukraine, to a decade of the initial work from the perch of my corner office at the global elite law practice Allen & Overy overlooking the Hong Kong Harbor, to 20 years living in Borough Park and working first in the New York office of Allen & Overy, this time from a corner office overlooking Rockefeller Center on one side and the Hudson River on the other, and then as assistant secretary for international markets of the US Department of the Treasury in a palatial office overlooking the East Gate of the White House. The *Kedushas Levi* has been at my side throughout the whole journey, offering sage guidance, strong support and providing exactly the answers needed in times of distress and anxiety like those facing us today.

Today, *kivrei tzaddikim* tours have become a cottage industry. *Tzaddikim* of modern Eastern Poland, there's a tour. *Tzaddikim* of modern Western Ukraine and Northern Romania, there's a tour. Pilgrimage to the Rebbe Rav Meilech in Lizhensk was in vogue for the longest time. Then, a few years ago, you weren't in unless you went to Reb Shayale in Kerestir. Today, everyone in Israel rushes to Bishtene to visit the Rebbe Rav Mordeche'le of



The recently unearthed original kever and ohel of the Kedushas Levi, Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev



The Berditchever Rebbe's menorah, which he requested from—and later returned to—the Kozhnutzer Maggid

Nadvorna during the Nine Days.

But I digress.

In 1995, if one were of a mind to visit the resting places of the chasidic masters in Ukraine, it was a real production. There were very few *kivrei tzaddikim* trip organizers. I had wanted to go to my maternal grandfather's ancestral hometown of Nadvorna ever since I could remember. The ducks finally got into a row in 1995. Someone gave me the number of a *Yid* in Meah She'arim who specialized in trips to Europe.

It took a good ten days before I got him on the phone. This was before cell phones were widely in use.

*"Dus redt Moyshe Silk fun Hong Kong."*

*"Viiiii?"* came the response with the *"iiii"* questioning upward emphatically.

*"Hong Kong."*

*"Shmongkang?!? Vi iz dus?"*

*"Nayn, Hong Kong... Sin... China."*

*"Ti mir a toive un hakt mir nisht ken China. Ich hub nisht kein tzait. Vos darfstu?"*

It was not an auspicious start, so I had a buddy in Israel call him back to get the ball rolling. We gave him our wish lists of cities. He knew a guy, who knew a guy, who knew a guy who had a car. That guy knew another guy who was a driver and knew most of the cities we wanted to visit. There was some Jewish blood in the driver's lineage. Or maybe not, but he did speak a broken Yiddish, with a very heavy Slavic accent, of course. *You could go here but you couldn't go there. Impossible to reach this town because of the roads. Bring cigarettes and single dollar bills—you'll need them for the guys with the keys to the cemeteries. Maybe they will be there. Maybe they won't. Alternate Thursdays...etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. Welcome to Ukraine.*

My friends couldn't believe I was going, and the local Ukrainians couldn't believe that we kept coming back to visit gravesites. The locals in Delatyn, where my maternal grandfather's family lived after World War I, were very vocal in telling us about watching our ancestors being shot into a mass grave as we walked into the forest. Dara Horn wrote an exceptional book about the phenomenon, *People Love Dead Jews*.

We settled on our itinerary. Fly to Kiev and immediately travel to Haditch and Nyezhin, to visit the *kevarim* of the Baal HaTanya and Mittler Rebbe of Chabad, respectively. Then south to Mezhibuzh and Berditchev, the resting places of the Baal Shem

Tov and the Kedushas Levi. After that, we were going to cut way west to my ancestral hometown of Nadvorna and its environs, including Delatyn and Stanislav (now called Ivano-Frankivsk) to pay tribute to Rav Bertche of Nadvorna and to search for the graves of my great-grandfather, great-grandmother and great-uncle. Then, due north to Premishlan to visit the resting places of the forefathers of the Nadvorna dynasty, including Rav Meir and his father and grandfather, and further north to the resting place of the Rebbe Rav Meshulam Zusha in Anapoli, before heading east on our way back to Kiev for our departure.

We had three heavy days of travel. Over a thousand miles and around 30 hours of driving on Ukrainian roads. All in the backseat of an itchy-pitsy red Lada.

My only distraction was the monotonous yet lush and beautiful veritable seas of cornfields and sunflowers. The stops were as taxing as the long roads between stops. Every visit to a *tzaddik's* resting place presented challenges to my heart and tear ducts through *davening* and *Tehillim* as great as those that my body endured while bumping along in our little Lada.

After a long drive west from Nyezhin and Haditch, we finally reached Berditchev in the mid-afternoon. Our driver took us to the home of Rabbi Shlomo Breuer, whom the Skverer Rebbe sent to Berditchev to look after the *Yidden* and rebuild the community there, including its rich culture and landmarks, such as the resting place of the Kedushas Levi. Rabbi Breuer and his *rebbeztzin* welcomed us warmly into their home. The *rebbeztzin* made us cold drinks from a homemade concentrate of local berries and fried up some vegetable latkes. The hospitality was, in the middle of Yehupitsville, exceptionally warm. Rabbi Breuer showed us the new *mikvah* that he had just built with a great deal of pride. We then went to the newly-built *ohel* of the Kedushas Levi.

The *ohel* had been completed not long before our visit and was a grand edifice not far from Rabbi Breuer's house. There were a few locals there to greet us. Each of them was a survivor with an interesting story of his own. Most were local and claimed to have been saved for one reason or another through the merits of the *heilige* Kedushas Levi.

But that was only the beginning of the story.

## Chapter One

### *The wavering flame of the Kedushas Levi—or was it?*

There was very little traffic at the Kedushas Levi's *ohel* in those days, and we were the only ones there, aside from a few of the older locals. The inside of the *ohel* was not different from many that we had visited on the trip: a large open room, a box of unused *licht* to light at the *tziyun*, many, many used *licht* that had been lit by visitors before us, perhaps there was a chair or a *shtender*, and *Tehillims* of various sizes. The focal point of the room was, of course, the actual *tziyun* of the Kedushas Levi.

There was a small shelf on the wall a few feet behind the *tziyun* on which rested a large glass container filled with olive oil with a large wick. The wick was not lit.

I was deeply troubled. There was a large vessel filled with oil clearly intended to be burning behind the *tziyun* of the Kedushas Levi, and yet it was not lit. And so, I tried every which way to light that wick, but to no avail. This bothered me to the core. On top of that, it was difficult to angle myself above the *tziyun* to reach the lamp without stepping on the Kedushas Levi's *matzeivah* or losing my balance. I tried every approach and every contortion. Match after match, burning my fingers on many of the attempts. All the while, I was thinking to myself, "Why is this so difficult? Such an easy task. Why is it *so, so* difficult?" Was it a message from above? Was it a bad omen? Or was it simply a matter of there being no means to hold the wick away from the side of the container to allow it sufficient oxygen for the flame to burn? Most certainly it was the latter, but I was worked up nonetheless.

## Chapter Two

*In the beginning there was darkness and confusion*

Reflecting on the trip after I returned to Hong Kong, I pondered the lack of flame in Berditchev as a catalyst for bringing greater recognition to the Berditchever Rebbe, the Rebbe Rav Mordche'le and others. It dawned on me that there was very little, if anything, available in a clear and accessible English of the great chasidic masters. What better way to cast the light of the Kedushas Levi on the world than making his Torah commentary available in clear, elegant, readable and accessible English?

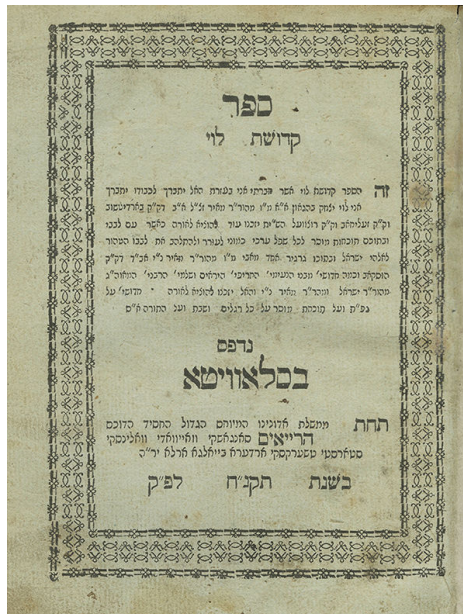
Let's put this in perspective. At the time, ArtScroll had already been in existence for a decade or so. They had published their inaugural *Megillas Esther*, as well as numerous variations of *Chumashim*, *siddurim* and *machzorim*. Their first Gemara did not appear until 1995. Other than Lubavitch, which produced the first English translation of the *Tanya* in 1973—and has continued to produce high-quality English translations of their *chasidus*—there was a very limited number of complete *sefarim* of *chasidus* available in English. The parents of my close friend Marcel Dimenstein, who was also living in Hong Kong at the time and was a Rimanover *einikel*, commissioned the translation of Rav Menachem Mendel of Rimanov's major discourses in a volume entitled *The Torah Discourses of Reb Menachem Mendel of Rimanov* in 1995. There

were a few others, but little to nothing of complete works of classical *chasidus* was available in English.

My path became clear. If leading Judaica publishers of the day could pump out major works in flawless and readable English, why couldn't we produce a series of top-notch translations of the chasidic classics? Easier said than done. I was working 80-plus hours a week in my law practice, I had a young family and a full plate of communal responsibilities, including being *gabbai* of one of the local *shuls* in Hong Kong and the community's *chevrah kaddisha*. In a word, I had a pretty full plate and not all the team members required for the task.

I decided to kick off the work with a translation of the chasidic classic *Maamar Mordechai*, *vertlach* of Rav Mordchele. My family has been aligned with this *chasidus* for generations. My original plan was to usher that volume in with other chasidic classics

and to eventually produce a whole series of translations. The *Kedushas Levi* was the *sefer* that I chose to inaugurate this series because of its status as one of the leading chasidic *sefarim*. Little did I see at the time the major gap between thought and reality. An undertaking of this nature and magnitude required a team of experts in the translation of chasidic thought rendered in classical Hebrew, as well as a support team of technical, copy and style proofreaders, citation checkers and graphics and layout experts.



Title page of a first-edition sefer *Kedushas Levi*, published in Slavita, 1798

## Chapter Three

*Finding the pearls in the sand*

Amassing a qualified team, let alone from a perch in Hong Kong, was far more challenging than finding a pearl that has fallen into the sand (see Rashi, *Bereishis* 37:1). But the search was on. After many false starts and more than a few shekels,

I had the good fortune of identifying a few exceptional translators to spearhead our team who had the technical knowledge of *chasidus*, a command of traditional sources and a gift of expression in clear and accessible English.

And so off we went on our journey of translating the *Maamar Mordechai* and *Kedushas Levi*. The process of searching and sifting the sand with a sieve shifted to finding the right "pearls" of wisdom in expression—the right word, the appropriate phrase that would accurately reflect sometimes arcane and many times deep and esoteric thoughts in an English that would keep our readers engaged. We cast away a ton of pebbles until we found those bright and shiny pearls. The translators would prepare the drafts, I would edit for substance, style and clarity of expression, and we



An impromptu swearing-in in the secretary's office

would iterate until we were happy with the product.

We finished a working draft of the *Maamar Mordechai* far in advance of the *Kedushas Levi*. The *Maamar Mordechai* is much shorter, and the Torah thoughts are more accessible than the *Kedushas Levi*. However, I felt that we needed to enter the market with a high-profile title if we were going to inaugurate a series of chasidic classics. As much as the *Maamar Mordechai* is near and dear to my heart, I was committed to holding back publication until after the *Kedushas Levi*. Thus the completed *Maamar Mordechai* has waited patiently on the shelf pending publication of the *Kedushas Levi*.

## Chapter Four

### *Refining the glimmer of the sapphire*

That goal was elusive. And we suffered more than a few delays—the press of my work, team members' unavailability because of other commitments, family *simchos*, and family events that were not *simchos* (like the loss of my father, ז"ל, and one of my sisters suddenly a few months later, and then, years later, my mother א"ה). Weeks grew into months and months into years. We nonetheless pressed on in our mission. But, more than the passage of time, refining the translation in content and style was just so very challenging. We aimed for perfection and settled for progress. We knew full well that we could not achieve perfection, but it was still our benchmark. We were determined that "[our] polishing [would produce] a sapphire" (*Eichah* 4:7) with a clean brightness.

## Chapter Five

### *The agony and the ecstasy*

After countless intensive phases of review and revision, I felt that the translation was ready to be seen, and I submitted it to

ArtScroll just around the time when I was starting my work at the Treasury Department in Washington, DC.

To my great delight, Rabbi Zlotowitz and Rabbi Scherman agreed to publish it. With that acceptance came a responsibility that ultimately greatly enhanced our final product. Namely, we had to ensure that our translation in substance, style and presentation met the lofty and uncompromising standards of ArtScroll. In my view, that responsibility was most welcome to me, because ultimately it meant a better product. One doesn't work for decades on a project of passion only to turn out a mediocre product.

At times, it felt like we were on an endless journey. My sole focus was the finish line, however far out that might have been. Being so deep in the weeds with such a magnitude of work ahead of us, the finish line was, most of the time, seemingly elusive. At times it felt like a marathon where that first 26 miles went smoothly enough and it was the last .2 miles that really imposed the pain! In our seemingly impossible task of climbing to heaven, we got our ladders out and took it rung by rung.

Here I am, nearly 30 years into this project, with only two volumes completed. It reminds me of the words of the Divrei Chaim of Sanz, who commented that, in his younger years, he set out to change the whole world, only later to pare that goal down to his own country, and later to his own region, and still later to his own city, and later yet to his own community, and even later to his own family, and, finally, by the time he had advanced in years, to his own self. Alas, it may be that I will not complete half or even a quarter of the "Chasidic Classics"; I nonetheless felt that I had accomplished something monumental when I held the first volume of the *Kedushas Levi* in my hands when it came off the press. That first Shabbos after the initial printing, I sat with Volume 3 in my hands to review that week's *parshah*, *Eikev*, and had a Viktor Frankl moment of achievement and fulfillment. It was as if the weight of a ton of bricks lifted off my shoulders.

My motivation when I embarked on this journey was to make the *Kedushas Levi* accessible to a greater audience by rendering in readable English the Torah thoughts of the great Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, which were originally recorded in classical Hebrew. So much has changed in this world and our community since I started this work. There have even been a few other attempts to render the *Kedushas Levi* in English—Rabbi Eliyahu Munk published a partial translation in 2009, and my dear friend Rabbi Tal Zwickler is also working on a partial translation of the work. This is, however, the first time of which I am aware that a translation of the entire *Kedushas Levi* on the Torah is being made available to the public. It is my honest hope and prayer that a complete and true translation of the holy words of the *Kedushas Levi* will benefit scholars in their work, those with little background who are in search of meaning, and everyone in between. This project is my small way of keeping the flame lit, as it were.

And it is that flame that has supported, comforted, motivated, uplifted and, at times, challenged me throughout.

## Chapter Six

### *Timeless messages of the Kedushas Levi: A beacon of hope and inspiration in times of suffering and strife*

Throughout this journey, the *Kedushas Levi* has been at my side as a trusted guide and inspiration, including in the darkness and confusion of our present circumstances in the wake of October 7.

My professional career delivered up a stream of seeming insurmountable challenges, with the possibility of commensurate immense rewards and no shortage of high intensity moments. For example, when a partner of an elite global law practice, I found myself negotiating the \$4.6 billion restructuring of a major Chinese corporation, which controlled 75 percent of Hong Kong's raw water supply. A failed intensive two-year restructuring was not an option. The company was "too big to fail." Its bankruptcy would have sent shock waves through the Chinese markets, with consequences regionally and even globally. No pressure whatsoever!

Later, as the Senate-confirmed assistant secretary for international markets of the US Department of the Treasury, I found myself in even higher stakes situations. Take staring down the minister of commerce of the People's Republic of China at the trade negotiations that led to our Phase One Trade Agreement. Or designing and implementing the \$94 billion of CARES Act relief to the airline industry during the COVID pandemic that helped protect over 700,000 jobs, without which the entire airline industry would very likely have collapsed. Or designing and then securing the confidence of senior government officials of 20 countries in Latin America that the US' signature Western Hemisphere policy initiative, aimed to bring growth through infrastructure finance, was effective and impactful, and then actually delivering on that.

Yet in these and many other high stakes matters, I kept my cool,

persisted and delivered results that I felt confident served my clients when I was a lawyer and the American people when I was a government official.

I would love to chalk up my success under pressure to attributes like my work ethic and pursuit for excellence. But, to be honest, I feel that I had an unfair advantage. Invariably, the *Kedushas Levi* provided the inspiration, as well as the precise wisdom and guidance I needed to get the job done.

Of course, you can search high and low in our detailed index of the *Kedushas Levi*, and you will come up with no corresponding entries on cross-border finance, international diplomacy, statecraft or the pressures of marshalling huge sums in emergency relief on an impossible timeline. But the work does provide plenty of guidance on how to cope with stress.

Here's one funny—and highly challenging—example. Having spent weeks in intense preparations to prepare our draft opening trade agreement with Beijing, the senior US negotiating team landed in China only to realize that our Chinese counterparts had written their own draft agreement in Chinese, disregarding our draft. I thus found myself alone with Secretary Mnuchin on the ride to the Diaoyutai State Guest House, where the negotiations were taking place, *shvitzing* while frantically translating the document for him.

There I was whizzing down a Beijing thoroughfare at the front of the motorcade, desperately trying to recall the English of a technical term in the Chinese draft. The word never came, but the *Kedushas Levi* comforted me nonetheless:

*If you encounter an obstacle that is bigger than you, do not be fearful or frightened. With simple faith, what you fear will not harm you. The circumstances may justify your fear given the enormity of the challenge. However, Scripture provides sound counsel. The Good L-rd never confronts us with insurmountable challenges that we cannot handle. A camel is loaded in accordance with its ability to bear the load. G-d has imbued each of us with a sufficient measure of self-confidence that will deliver success. Don't flinch! Put your head down. Take a deep breath. One can always overcome seemingly insurmountable consequences with an appropriate degree of steadfast faith and confidence that all will be okay.*

And when it came to facing off with senior Chinese officials on barriers to trade in financial services and energy trade, the *Kedushas Levi*'s words served me well. *The Divine attribute of truth objected to G-d's suggestion that he create the world. What did G-d do? He cast truth out of heaven, down to the earth. G-d took the objection made by the attribute of truth seriously, and as an answer, embedded truth in the very lowest levels of existence, making it impossible to conduct even the most fundamental functions of society without it.*

The truth was, I pointed out to my Chinese colleagues, that PRC banks in the United States had realized double- and even triple-digit annual growth in their assets over the prior decade, while US banks in China struggled to achieve even single-digit growth. As



Speaking at the launch of the América Crece (Growth in the Americas) program

we say in Yiddish, “*Di beste ligent iz di reine emes*” (the best lie is the absolute truth). The truth spoke volumes and carried the day, not only for our negotiating team but for the American people. If this thought was apt in that context, how many times more so is it in the context of the utter falsehoods that have spread like wildfire in the past 11 months?

Yet these challenges pale in comparison to the news that greeted us at the conclusion of Simchas Torah this year. Word had started to trickle through over Yom Tov, painting a very incomplete and grossly understated picture of what had transpired over that fateful weekend. Graphic images, descriptions and details of the most barbaric and depraved assault on women, children, elderly—including Holocaust survivors—and men were, and still are, at once numbing and trauma-inducing.

The attack was much closer to home for me. My son serves in the IDF. I’ve gotten used to it. I programmed myself not to think about the next bit of news. I learned on that Motzaei Yom Tov that my daughter had been called up to join her former unit in the IDF reserves.

Sleep eluded me. Numbness frustrated my yearning for comfort through prayer. And food was not appealing.

And, yet again, the *Kedushas Levi* was there for me. My comfort came unexpectedly in the form of a video clip from Rabbi Shais Taub. His message came from the timeless wisdom, guidance and strength of the *Kedushas Levi*.

Rabbi Taub recounted a *farbrengen* of the Lubavitcher Rebbe over 50 years ago, after the Yom Kippur War. The *chasidim* asked the Rebbe how they could possibly be joyous in the face of murder and destruction of the Yom Kippur War. The Rebbe referred to the Berditchever Rebbe. “G-d is your shadow,” quoted the Berditchever, in the name of the Baal Shem Tov from *Tehillim* (121:5). Just as a shadow mirrors the movements of a person, so, too,

Hashem, as it were, mirrors a person’s conduct. Thus, the Rebbe reminded his *chasidim*, if we are joyous, so too will Hashem send joy and light into the world!

The *Kedushas Levi* has provided tremendous comfort as I try to process the events of this past Simchas Torah and those that have followed. I found the *Kedushas Levi* to be speaking directly to me, instructing me to see my problems and those of the world from a different perspective and walk away charged with energy, optimism and faith. Try this one on for size. *There are two kinds of war. The first is a simple kind, where one nation contends with another. The second kind of war is one orchestrated by G-d in order to strengthen our hearts to trust Him. When we see our safety threatened, we will rely on the A-mighty.*

At a time when anti-Semitism has spiked and each headline seemingly delivers dark clouds over our heads, the *Kedushas Levi* provides the guidance we could all use right now. It helps unlock the deeper meaning of current events when things seem overly complicated, intractable or just plain grim. We are all struggling to process these wrenching events and highly anxious over what is to come. I’m thankful for and comforted by this profound and deep work that unlocks secrets, provides unique insight and perspective, provides grounding and strengthens our conviction and connection to the fundamental realism that the *Eibershter* is in control. I invite you to supplement your chicken soup (or whatever other modality works for you) with a small dose of the *Kedushas Levi* as the sure-fire cure for grappling with today’s challenges. ●

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