

# Voice From the Grave

*A heavenly mission to perform  
an eternal mitzvah*



AS TOLD TO CHAYA SILBER BY  
REB MEIR HERSH BERGER OF  
CHESED SHEL EMES

I

t was on a Sunday morning, just after Sukkos a couple of years ago, when I received an unusual phone call.

“Hello? Is this Chesed Shel Emes?” asked the caller.

“Yes. Who is this?”

“My name is Asher Freund.\* I live on Taylor Street [in Williamsburg], in a large

apartment building with a lot of *heimishe Yidden*. I just got a very strange phone call. I didn’t know what to do about it, and someone told me to contact you.”

“How can I help you?”

“I’m not really sure. It was an official from the medical examiner’s office, calling about a woman named Regina Schwartz. They said she lived in this building, and they were calling her neighbors to ask whether we knew anything about her and whether she had any health issues or other



conditions. I have no idea who Regina Schwartz was and I was about to hang up, but then I asked them why they needed this information. The caller explained that Regina Schwartz died a few months ago and no one came to claim the body, so they were donating it to a medical school for research. Of course this was very upsetting to hear, even though I don't know who this woman is. I asked around and everyone said that you're the right address to handle this situation."

I felt a familiar sense of dread as I realized where this was heading. Sadly, there are far too many elderly Jews who are *niftar* alone, without family, about whom society had forgotten. Often they languish in morgues until they are given a pauper's burial or their bodies were donated to medical research. We receive such phone calls from various nursing homes and government agencies all the time.

I asked Mr. Freund for as much information as he could provide, and quickly called the Brooklyn Medical Examiner's Office, which was then led by Dr. Hirsch, and with whom we had an excellent rapport. We had been working closely with the medical examiners office for years, and they truly respected what we were trying to accomplish, to preserve the dignity of the departed. One of the deputies looked up the name and confirmed what the caller had told me.

Indeed, Mrs. Schwartz had been living at 85 Taylor Street years ago, and had spent the last ten years in a nursing home in the Bronx. She had no living relatives, no one to inquire about her or visit her to brighten her days. During the final weeks of her life she was transferred to Methodist Hospital, where she passed away in August, alone and forgotten. Her body was not claimed by anyone, and has been frozen in the morgue, ever since, waiting for someone to

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remember her.

As it happens, this particular hospital is in constant touch with the medical examiner's office, and calls frequently to ask if there are any unclaimed bodies upon which to perform medical research. Since no one had claimed Mrs. Schwartz's body all this time, the official gave permission for her body to be donated to this university so that it could be dissected for medical science, *Rachamana litzlan*. The university wanted to learn more about the woman and any pre-existing conditions she might have had, which could impact their research. Somehow, someone at the medical examiner's office found a phone number for the Friends, who lived at the same address, and tried to get more details about Regina's medical history. This was a tremendous act of *hashgachah*, which enabled us to fight to save this poor woman from a horrific fate.

The ground was burning beneath our feet. An elderly deceased Jewish woman was about to have her body dissected in the

name of science. The race to save her was on.

I told the deputy medical examiner, with whom I have a good relationship, to please hold the transfer; we were going to claim Mrs. Schwartz and bury her in a Jewish cemetery.

"You need to hurry, because the hospital is going to pick up the body on Wednesday if no one has claimed it by then," the deputy urged me. I asked him to hold the transfer for a couple of days, and received a promise that this would be taken care of. We quickly filed the paperwork and declared our intent to give this neglected woman an honorable Jewish burial.

Now for the next step—to find out as much as we could about Regina Schwartz, or her husband, if she was married, to see if we could bury her near family members. Otherwise we would prepare a grave in the Chesed Shel Emes *beis olam*, then located in Liberty, New York.

I asked a *yungerman* who works with me if he could hurry to 85 Taylor Street and try to ask the neighbors if anyone remembers a woman named Regina Schwartz, who used to live at that address. He spent a few hours asking the neighbors, but no one could remember such a woman by that name.

After a few exhausting hours of knocking on doors and asking about this elderly woman, the volunteer finally hit pay dirt. He found a resident of the building who had lived there for a long time, and who vaguely remembered an elderly man named Mr. Schwartz, who was childless and was *niftar* many years ago. He thought the man's name was Avrum Mordche, perhaps, and remembered that he used to sit in the Sighet *shul* for hours and say *Te-hillim*. Perhaps this woman was his wife?

Now armed with a bit more informa-

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tion, he went to the Sighet *shul* and asked about this elderly *Yid*, but no one could recall the exact details. Someone had a vague memory about an old man who had no children, and who would say *Tehillim* for many hours a day. He was *niftar* many years ago, and was buried in the Sigheter *beis olam*, in the Floral Park cemetery in New Jersey. We immediately called Rabbi Shulem Lazer Teitelbaum , who is in charge of the Sigheter *beis olam*, to ask about Avrum Mordche Schwartz, an elderly, childless man who was buried there.

"I have a lot of Schwartzes who were laid to rest in this *beis olam*, but none of them are named Avrum Mordche," declared Rabbi Teitelbaum , after studying the records carefully. "I'm so sorry."

Time was running out and we needed to claim the body before the university hospital sent their people to do the same. On Monday night, we made the decision to pick up Mrs. Schwartz from the morgue and bury her in Liberty, New York. She wouldn't be laid to rest with family members, but at least she would be among her own people, her body remaining whole.

On Tuesday morning, just one day before the deceased had been scheduled to be picked up by the medical school, we received a phone call from a Mr. Klein.

"Please don't laugh at me, but I have a very weird story to share," he began. I was instantly all ears.

He then proceeded to tell us about a strange dream that his wife had the previous evening. Before he began, he wanted to give us some background.

"My mother-in-law lived for many years in an apartment building at 85 Taylor Street," he began.

As soon as he said these words, I felt goose bumps. Even before he began his story, I knew it would be about Mrs. Schwartz, the woman we would be burying that day.

"My *shvigger* was a real *tzadeikes*, who spent her time feeding the elderly, the homebound, and those who had no family. For many years she took care of a couple, Mr. and Mrs. Schwartz, who lived in the same building. They were Holocaust survivors who had no children, no one to look after them. My *shvigger* would cook hot meals for them and my wife would deliver it.

"Years later, when my wife and I were married for a while, and my *shvigger* was no longer able to care for them, my wife inherited this mitzvah from her mother. She would cook nourishing food and send it to the Schwartzes on a regular



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basis. Our son, who is now married, would deliver these meals, which the Schwartzes appreciated very much. They were very fine, gentle people.”

“What happened to them?” I asked with bated breath.

“Well, Mr. Schwartz was *niftar* in the late 1980s, and his wife stayed alone in the apartment for about ten years, during which my wife would continue preparing food and sending it with my son. And then one day she became very sick and was taken to a hospital, or maybe a nursing home. We had no idea where she went, and even though we tried, we were unable to track her down. That was the last we heard of her.”

Mr. Klein paused for breath, and I waited for more information. Where was Mr. Schwartz laid to rest? Did he know any more details?

“Unfortunately, we had no more information to go on, and we forgot about the Schwartzes. And now I get to the strange part of my story. Early this morning, out of the blue, my wife told me that she had the strangest dream the night before. Mr. Schwartz, for whom she had cooked meals many years earlier, stood before her, and told her, ‘My name is Moshe Zev Schwartz, and I am buried in the Sigheter *beis hachayim*, in the third row from the gate.’ My wife woke up, stunned and shaken at this strange dream.

“I told her it’s probably nothing, most dreams are nonsense, but then a few minutes later a creepy thing happened. We got a call from our married son who lives in Lakewood. This was the boy who delivered meals to the Schwartzes all these years. I began to shiver when he told me he had a strange dream. Mr. Schwartz, for whom he used to deliver food so many years ago, was standing before him, reminding him that his name was Moshe Zev Schwartz and that he was buried in the Sigheter *beis hachay-*

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*im*, in the third row from the gate.”

As Mr. Klein related the story, I felt hot and cold all over. Here was the missing link, the information we were waiting for. “Wait a minute. You said his name was Moshe Zev? I thought he was Avrum Mordche Schwartz. That’s who we were looking for.”

“No. His name was definitely Moshe Zev, and his wife was Rivka. I think they called her Regina.”

Now I realized, with sudden clarity, why they hadn’t been able to find the *niftar* in the Sigheter *beis olam*. I had given Rabbi Teitelbaum the wrong first name!

“What made you think of calling us?” I asked.

“After I realized that my wife and son had the same dream, I knew it had to mean something important. So I walked over to 85 Taylor Street to ask some of the neighbors if they knew anything about this couple. I didn’t know them, but just yesterday Chessed Shel Emes was asking about them,”

one of the neighbors told me. I quickly looked up your number to tell you the story, because I figured that you needed it for some reason.”

I thanked Mr. Klein and explained that it was a matter of the utmost importance, as we were dealing with a *meis mitzvah*. Then I called back Rabbi Teitelbaum and gave him Mr. Moshe Zev’s true name.

Within minutes he found the *chelkah*, three rows from the gate, exactly as the *niftar* had said in his dream. I asked Rabbi Teitelbaum to find me a *chelkah* nearby. Although there was nothing in the same row, he found a respectable *kever* for this lonely woman, not far from her husband.

That very day, Chessed Shel Emes had the incredible *zechus* to bring Mrs. Rivka Schwartz, a lonely and childless woman, to *kever Yisrael*, not far from the resting place of her husband, who was *niftar* 33 years earlier. We said *Kaddish* at her *kever*, in the presence of a *minyan*, for this woman who left no mourners, who had no one to say *Kaddish* for her *neshamah*.

Though the end of her life must have been sad and lonely, clearly, Mrs. Schwartz had an incredible *zechus*. Her long-departed husband was allowed to appear in a dream to two people simultaneously, the woman and her son who had cared for them, so that she could be laid to rest in the Sigheter *chelkah*, close to her husband, instead of alone in a plot in Liberty. May their souls be bound in eternal rest, as they bask together in the glory of their heavenly reward. ●

*\*Names have been changed for privacy.*

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