

# Revealing the nobility of the human spirit

From Djerba to Jerusalem - Libby Lazewnik-Artscroll

Miriam Kay

One of the most enduring, vivid memories of my years in Gateshead, where I lived at the beginning of my marriage, was the Hilchos Shabbos shiur I attended given by Rabbi Shimon Bitton ztl. But it wasn't so much the shiur that I remember - although I still actually do recall some of the main points - as the Rov himself. Just to look at him was an inspiration, his eyes sparkling with warmth and goodness, his ever-present smile radiating happiness and serenity - all deriving from his deep love of Torah and what it represented. The extent of his *tzidkus* can be gauged not only from his incredible accomplishments in his tragically short life; but also from the fact that when his holy body was exhumed for re-interment in Eretz Yisroel, it was, to the amazement of the Chevra Kadisha, completely intact.

This newly-written book is a tribute to Rabbi Bitton, but the main subject is his wife, Rebbetzin Shulamit o"h, who outlived him by many years. A worthy, appropriate helpmate to this great man, joy in life, particularly joy in Torah, was her trademark quality. Having been acquainted with both of these wonderful people, it was with great excitement that I first set eyes on this biography - and with a feeling of great inspiration that I finished it. Reading through the more than 300 pages, filled with photos, one feels her colourful, varied and eventful life and a strong urge to emulate, at least to some degree, this special lady who devoted herself not only to Torah and to her husband who represented this Torah, but also to all those with

whom she came into contact, constantly radiating *simchas hachaim* wherever she went.

Her story is all the more amazing when one realises how incredibly well she adapted from one culture to another, with all her heart, at the same time managing to form the strongest bonds with those around her who were part of her new milieu. This was seen most strikingly at the beginning of her odyssey, when as a young teenager, she travelled all the way from her home in Tunisia to Gateshead - an only child leaving behind her dotting parents - to join Mr Kohn's famous sem; and at the end of her life, when years after the death of her first husband, she married Rav Yaakov Yeshaya Blau, a huge talmid chochom and revered member of the Eda Charedis, taking on all his minhagim to which she was unused, and endearing herself to his Yiddish-speaking family - a language with which she was unfamiliar.

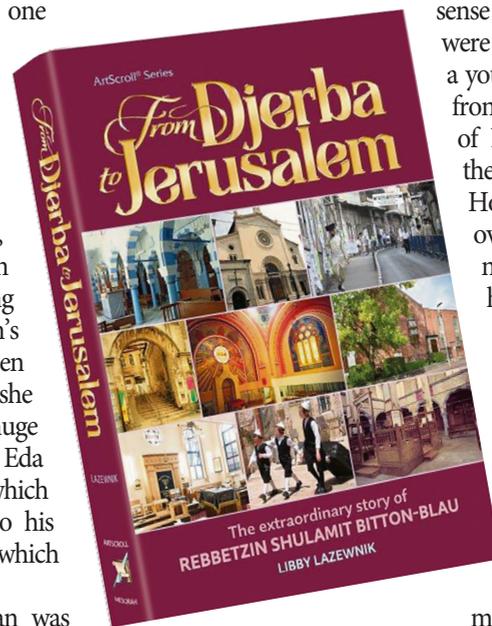
Read this book and see how a woman was able to experience a life of joy despite living in the direst poverty, where she had to borrow one shilling and nine pence for a loaf of bread to feed her husband and children, yet wasn't ashamed to do so, knowing it was for a higher

purpose. The hand-me-down clothes that her young children wore were similarly accepted with no sense of shame, knowing that the family were living the highest ideals. See how a young girl was able to quickly adapt from living in the hot, bright climate of North Africa, her homeland, to the dark, drab streets of Gateshead. How a devoted wife was able to overcome the sudden loss of the man to whom she had devoted her life. All this was able to be accomplished thanks to her sunny disposition, her burning love of Torah, and her all-encompassing *bitochon*.

She lifted the spirits of the downtrodden, gave unstintingly of her time to the lonely and needy, and provided a wonderful role model for her adoring students to

whom she taught Torah.

This is a story revealing the nobility of the human spirit in all its glory and in all its joy. Read it and you'll be all the better for it.



# Connecting the past with the future

Edmonton Federation Cemetery- Rebbetzin Aviva Landau-published by the Federation of Synagogues

Eli Kienwald

All cemeteries are hallowed places. A feeling of foreboding and a subconscious fear pervade visitors when they are made starkly aware of the finality of life, of the existence of another world that they cannot see, and of the presence of ancestors who still possess social agency. Perhaps these feelings are mediated somewhat by the realisation that our moral obligations towards the departed are what differentiates humans from the animal world. This creates a continuum between the dead and the living and establishes a bond that is one of the basic tenets of our social structure. The dead cannot bury themselves.

Jewish cemeteries (albeit not exclusively) are the quintessence of *chesed shel emes* (honouring the departed), a Divine commandment which obliges us to give the utmost respect to our fathers and forefathers' resting places. I am reminded of what happened in 1981 when a suspected ancient Jewish cemetery was discovered in Jewbury, part of the city of York, as Sainsbury's supermarket was redeveloping a site. The York Archaeological Trust had reason to believe that those buried there might be connected to the massacre of 1190 and wished to carry out osteological analyses on the bones in the hope that this would shed new light on that infamous event. However, they had the sensitivity of asking the then Chief Rabbi, Sir (later Lord) Immanuel Jakobovits for his views. The Chief Rabbi expressed his concerns in a beautifully written letter that persuaded the authorities to

shelve any plans for further tests "whatever the scientific and historical loss". The bones were reburied in the presence of the Chief Rabbi close to the original cemetery, which has become a place of pilgrimage.

The Edmonton cemetery, located in a rather nondescript part of North London, was dedicated to the Federation Burial Society by Lord Montague in 1889 and has been in use ever since. I have visited Edmonton several times and, on each occasion I was nearly overcome by a new feeling, which I could not attribute to psychological fear or apprehension. It was something more intimate and subtle. I would describe it as a sensation of deep sanctity hovering in the air among the gloom of the old matzeivas. I had experienced the same feeling only once before, when I spent time in the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague, visiting the grave of Rav Yehuda Loew (the Maharal) ztl.

This new book has finally enlightened me on the source of that strange feeling. It reviews the lives of 50 prominent Rabbanim and Rebbetzins, and of notable communal leaders whose final resting place is in this cemetery. As well as being a clear and useful guide to the location of the relevant graves, it provides a fascinating insight into the rabbinical tradition of tremendous scholarship, communal dedication and pastoral care associated with these Federation tzaddikim. Edmonton is the final resting place of a succession of remarkable saintly men and women, from one of the earliest burials, that of

Rabbi Dr Moritz Gruenwald z"l (d. 1895) to the most recent, that of Dayan Gershon Lopian ztl, who passed away in 2014, depriving the community of his wisdom, warmth and human understanding.

The book tells us of the anguish and grief expressed by the thousands and thousands of mourners who accompanied Rabbi Aba Werner ztl (the first Rabbi of the Machzikei Hadath Synagogue in Brick Lane) at his funeral (d.1913), of the moving hespedim (eulogies) given by the Dayanim Y Y Lichtenstein and Dayan Berkovits ztl at the levaya of Dayan Michael Fisher ztl, Rav Rashi of the Federation of Synagogues (d. 2004) and of the steady stream of visitors showing their respect at the kevorim of Rebbetzin Rivka Chaikin o.h (d. 1923), Rabbi Eliezer Gordon ztl (d. 1910) and Rabbi Simcha Rubin ztl (the Sassover Rebbe - d. 2003).

That grief, those words of Torah, that filial devotion did not fly away as the mourners dispersed after the funeral, but attached themselves to the ground where the kevuros took place and permeated the air around the graves, giving the Edmonton cemetery a special sanctity and making it a place where visitors can connect to the past and draw inspiration for the future.

The book is thoughtful, well researched and a 'must read' for all.

To obtain a copy of this book, please contact [info@federation.org.uk](mailto:info@federation.org.uk) or visit your local Jewish bookstore.