

# THE MITZVAH MOBILES OF MANHATTAN

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Photo/Alan Rokach

Isidore Haiblum



## *Love Letters*

*(for Mary Beth, my wife)*

1

She writes that she is glad he's coming home.  
"My empty bed is too horrible—  
also my empty hands and arms and etc.—  
If only we knew where we were.  
The skimobiles are noisy.  
Why not a poem about noise?  
I wish you would write a poem about me—  
because of me—"

2

He answers first about the human traffic.  
The urbane hotshots hotfooting it on Fifth  
Avenue,  
lips locked because whoever screams first loses.

3

He writes how mornings get lost in the city.  
Underground the workers pace on the station  
platforms  
like soldiers, no train in sight.  
In the park, he's restless,  
watching the horses trot tourists in traps,  
caged, pacing, driven, unable to come to terms,  
mad manure steaming in the street like a hot  
breakfast.

He starts to say that spirit is more than a response  
to the question each morning asks and discovers  
his way:

"I miss the curling reach of your voice  
that no place in me is too far from.

4

Only recently have I felt at home in you.  
There were times when I didn't feel much.  
Other images clogged my blood.  
The last time, for example, I dreamed of someone  
else  
making love to you.  
All day it was difficult keeping my mind off what  
I'd seen.  
But whatever desire it expresses I haven't the  
heart to pursue.  
Proust said that dreams are not to be converted  
into reality.  
But I learned it from you.

5

All my flags are up for you, baby.  
My spirit waits on my tongue for your mouth.  
When we kiss I know the meaning of home.

6

Separated from you I feel the meaning of  
Diaspora.  
Let's dream of the ingathering, exiles together.  
I like to get in as far as I can  
and starting slowly off my way through to you,  
unlocking rooms, shattering idols, until there is  
only  
the dark delectable sweat of your space cupped in  
my hands  
your breaths flicking my nape like a crop  
as we ride home  
flickering, flickering, flickering  
until our knees melt and we race in flame.  
Oh, darling, if only our children have similar  
luck!

7

Afterwards let's browse through the house,  
grazing until we're ready to put the feedbag on.  
Then we'll sit opposite each other at the table in  
our robes  
and eat the cold apples together."



I receive my assignment: I am to breach a Lubavitch mitzvah mobile and flush out a story, one that will explain the parked white-walled vans, the eager black-clad young Chassidim buttonholing pedestrians all over New York City, seeking out the Jews and inviting them into their trucks. The streets seem awash with them — especially before Jewish holidays — but what is it they want?

My editors, in their wisdom, have made a perfect choice. I bring no pre-conceived notions to my task; my ignorance in these matters is almost complete. Yet I am not entirely without credential. The Lubavitch Chassidim speak, read and write Yiddish and so do I. No doubt our bookshelves contain different texts; theirs religious, mine secular; still, we ought to get along.

It is the week before Passover and mitzvah "tanks" and "tankists" (so the Chassidim have dubbed their vans and crew) are roaming the city. They can be found on numerous street corners, their dour attire, long beards and somber headwear strangely at odds with the surrounding environment. Tracking them down should be easy enough. But a mere guided tour through a mobile unit won't do. My aim is to linger a while, chat with both Chassidim and their quarries, the people who come in off the street. For this I need permission.

Permission is elusive. When I call the Brooklyn headquarters of the Lubavitch movement, I am told that mitzvah mobiles are never scheduled in advance, only on the mornings of their departure; it is now late afternoon. I am given the name of a contact and told to try to reach him tomorrow. Four tomorrows come and go, but either my contact is off somewhere or the schedules aren't ready.

A new authoritative voice greets me on the fifth morning.

This voice wants to interview me,

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make sure that I'm on the up-and-up; permission can't be granted to just anyone, it says. The voice suggests I appear at Lubavitch headquarters the following Monday.

By now I've begun to feel a bit queasy. The magazine I represent is a new one, yet to make its first appearance; few people have heard of it. My own dealings with Chassidim are almost non-existent. Worse, I am not even remotely observant. How will I ever pass muster?

My publisher is in town Sunday morning and I decide to hike over to his office and pick up a brochure about our journal; it may help to explain who I am. Ambling along Fifth Avenue towards the office, I run into a mitzvah mobile.

The corner of Fifth Avenue and Fifty-Ninth Street is one of the most urbane in Fun City. Surrounded by luxury towers on three corners and the fringes of Central Park on the fourth, this sector is the hub of big-town sophistication. Swank hotels, posh eateries and smart shops glitter in the midday sun. Horse drawn carriages are lined up waiting to carry tourists and clinging couples through the park. And this is where the Lubavitch mitzvah mobile has set up its motorized pushcart. Young Chassidim are on the watch, eyes and hands moving to ferret out the *landsleit* in the vast Sunday crush. I see a chance to come up with at least a snippet of my story and stroll by, trying to look casual. Despite my nifty Lee jeans and jacket and western checkered shirt I'm spotted at once:

"Are you Jewish?"

It is a breathless, slender teenager, with a short, sparse, black beard, black hat, black suit and wrinkled, tieless, white shirt. The other tankists, I see, are dressed in identical fashion.

I admit that I am.

"Have you put on *t'fillin* today?"

I say no. And am immediately ushered into the van. A tall, blond bearded Chassid in his early twenties places a yarmulka on my head, helps me bind the *t'fillin* on my arm (next to my heart) and on my head; together in Hebrew, we recite the blessing and the

opening paragraph of the *Sh'ma*. I tell him this is the first time since my *bar-mitzvah* that I've put on *t'fillin*.

"Do you have *t'fillin* at home?" he asks.

I nod yes.

"Have them inspected," he says, "and put them on every weekday."

I am handed a leaflet. The Chassid points to the part that describes the other mitzvot:

*Study Torah every day.*

*Have a charity box in your home.*

*Have a m'zuzah on the right doorpost of every room.*

*Keep holy Jewish books in your home.*

There is a sixth mitzvah too, directed at females:

*All women and even young girls from approximately the age of 3 and up should light the candles every Shabbos and Yomtov eighteen minutes before sunset with the proper blessing.*

The Chassid gives me a *pushka* at this point—a pink-colored charity box—asks if I have a *siddur* at home, and says I should get one, comes up with a round hand-made *shmura matzah* for the Seder. "Begin with some of these mitzvot," he tells me. "Later you can do more."

"More? How many are there?"

Before he can answer, four smiling teenage girls have pushed into the van, come quite likely for the glass candle holders being given away; the foursome is chatting happily in Hebrew. I am surprised to see them here, having been told that Chassidim avoid women. I expect my host to turn aside or at least avert his eyes, but he greets his visitors warmly and with a nod of his head indicates that I may go; the van has become congested. I leave.

Walking over to another Chassid outside, I ask: "Do you approach women, too?"

He shrugs, "Of course," and hands me a leaflet for women; it says:

*If you will observe the kindling of the Sabbath lights you will merit to see the lights of the redemption of the Jewish people.*

I am still clutching my *pushka*. A



woman hurries over to give me a donation. I wave her away. A Chassid has cornered a hippy; the hippy is shaking his head no; the Chassid is saying, "Come on, be a sport."

The crowd, meanwhile, is pouring past, the Chassidim dashing around. I have asked a few questions, but this seems like the wrong time to intervene. I trot off to my publisher who knows some Lubavitch Chassidim of his own. A phone call results in a definite appointment next Tuesday. My mission, it seems, is finally off the ground.

But when I turn up with a photographer at the appointed spot on Fifth Avenue and 47th Street, it is bare of Chassidim. I get Brooklyn on the line. "Where are you?!" I ask, feeling stood up. The tank was called off, I'm told, because the tankists were busy preparing for Pesach. Call back after Pesach. I'm ready to hang up but the man on the other end wants to know what I—a total stranger—have done to properly cleanse my house of *chometz*. In some detail he tells me what I *should* do. My misgivings about *ever* getting this story have, by now, begun to take on hefty proportions.

So when I show up two weeks later, alone, for another try—this one on Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street (near the main branch of the Public Library)—I am prepared for the worst. Instead I am greeted happily by six beaming young men who—plainly—want nothing more than to make me feel at home. I can hardly believe it. Again I enter the van, put on *t'fillin* (for the second time in over two decades), recite the *bracha*. Then, seated on a bench at a narrow table, I finally take up where I left off weeks ago:

"How many mitzvot," I ask, "are there in all?"

"Six hundred and thirteen," my young bearded guide, Yitzchak, tells me. (The rest of the crew are out on the street chasing after Jews.)

"But you suggest starting with only a few?"

He raises a finger. "One mitzvah brings to the rest."

I ask about the mitzvah campaign's ultimate goal.

"That all Jews should do the mitzvot; then *Mashiach* (the Messiah) will come."

A tall order. I ask if he really believes that will happen.

He shrugs. "We reach as many as we can."

There are, he tells me, about ten mitzvah tanks roving New York City, between thirty and forty throughout the entire U.S.; they are manned by rotating teams of Yeshiva students, members of the Lubavitch youth organization. "Tanks Against Assimilation," the Lubavitcher Rebbe has called them. Their crews pass out literature, coax, wheedle and cajole Jewish passers-by into the van. A quote from Maimonides in a leaflet given me explains the tremendous emphasis placed on this and even the simplest type of mitzvah:

*... every person must view himself . . . as half deserving merit and half deserving punishment . . . and (he should) similarly (view) the whole world as half deserving merit, etc . . . if he performs one Mitzvah he has tipped the balance for himself and for the entire world to the side of merit, and has caused for himself and for them rescue and deliverance.*

Perhaps seventy to eighty persons a day enter a mitzvah mobile; between four and five hundred are approached.

Yitzchak exits to do street duty; an equally young but taller Chassid from Great Britain takes his place. I ask him:

"Why are you doing this?"

He answers without hesitation. "Because I'm told by the Rebbe to do it." The Rebbe is Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who has just celebrated his twenty-fifth anniversary as leader of the Chabad-Lubavitch Chassidic movement. "He is no ordinary person," my bearded friend explains. "He understands more than anyone else. Some Chassidic leaders

**I'm ready to hang up but the man on the other end wants to know what I—a total stranger—have done to properly cleanse my house of "chometz."**

are said to work miracles, but the Rebbe likes teaching Chassidism through philosophy. He has set up Lubavitch centers and Chabad houses all over the world for this purpose. The Rebbe is the leader of our generation, the most inspiring man in Judaism."

At this point, a grinning, long-haired young man—he looks like a student—has been brought into the other end of the van. An intense debate is in progress, for this customer doesn't want to put on *t'fillin*. "It sounds like mysticism to me," he argues.

My friend, the British Chassid, is telling me, "Today we had a Russian Jew—one of the recent immigrants—who never saw *t'fillin* before. . . ."

The student, at the other end, is talking about creation, "First there was this gas. . . ."

Chassid: "How did this gas come about?"

Student: "How was God created?"

British Chassid to me: "Another man came in to put on *t'fillin* for the first time in sixty-five years. . . ."

Student to *his* Chassid: "Well, that's very interesting, but I'm still not ready to call myself religious."

Chassid: "Religious? Terms mean nothing, we are speaking of a way of life. . . ."

British Chassid to me: "The elderly often cry when they come in here. . . ."

Student: "All this sounds like blind obedience. . . ."

My Chassid cocks an ear, has finally gotten the drift of this wrangle.

Leaving me, he jumps up. "If I can explain, rationally, the reason for one mitzvah," he says to the student, "will you follow it?"

The student gives him a maybe.

"All right," my guide says, "I'll tell you about m'zuzahs. . . ."

I go out on the street to catch the action there. It is a warm, sunny day. Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue is booming. My Chassidim share the block with a flower cart, a hot dog stand, a row of phonebooths, a pair of newsstands. "Excuse me, are you Jewish?"

"That's all I need," a tall well-dressed man says, picking up speed. An older, heavy-set man brushes aside his interlocutor, "You don't have to worry about me," he assures him. A third Chassid has a catch, is walking a thirtyish man with a brief case and raincoat toward the van.

Yitzchak, my first guide, joins me. "There is only one way for Jews," he says, "the way of the Torah. If someone doesn't know, that's not his fault. But he should learn. No one is exempt. *All* must do the mitzvot." He beams at me. "Then *Mashiach* will come. Eventually it will happen."

A high school student in a yarmulka stops to chat with Yitzchak. The man carrying a brief case steps out of the van. I go over to him, I want to know what it's like for him. He shakes his head, tells me he's late for work and rushes off. A young man in modish dress enters the van. Yitzchak comes over to ask me about my Yiddish. I tell



They changed my life. In every town, in every city, they help people. No other religious organization does what they do. Everyone respects them."

Why did he enter the van?

"To put on *t'fillin*."

"Do you put them on often?"

"Every now and then."

A white haired retired man has gone in and out in the meantime. "Why?" I ask him.

"To show I accept my fellow man," he replies. "I am not formally religious."

An N.Y.U. business student has put on *t'fillin*.

"It's nice to do sometimes. No, I'm not religious, but this is a convenient way of fulfilling a religious obligation, isn't it?"

A cab driver puts on *t'fillin*.

"Tell me about it," I say.

"The last time was five years ago. I'm not religious but I wanted to remind myself I'm Jewish." He ponders a moment. "Putting on *t'fillin*, you know, is the way man shows his relationship to God. . . ."

A breeze has begun to blow; I have spent nearly two hours with this mitzvah mobile crew and found them to be more personable than I had imagined. I prepare to leave but I am called by Yitzchak, who, it seems, has a special message for me. "You have been brought here not just for your article," he tells me earnestly. "Remember what I say. There is a greater reason."

I shake hands with each Chassid in turn, and go.

Later in the day, as I make my way home along Fifty-Seventh Street, I encounter a mitzvah mobile—a different one. Dusk is about to fall. A red bearded Chassid approaches me.

"Are you Jewish?"

I smile my yes.

"Have you put on *t'fillin* today?"

Again I grin yes, glad to be able to do so.

We walk together down the block.

"You should go on to the other mitzvot," he tells me, "Man should never stand still; he must climb higher and higher." \*

**This unusual photograph shows the Lubavitcher Rebbe putting on *t'fillin*. The photographer is Alan Rokach, a free lance photographer currently preparing a book on Chassidism.**

him about my family, secular Yiddishists who believed that the Jewish People are a nation, not a religion. He shakes his head in disbelief.

"How many of these Yiddishists are there now?" he asks.

"Not many," I admit. I ask him if he reads Yiddish books; I mention Chaim Grade, Avram Sutzkever, Isaac Bashevis Singer, a trio of renowned writers.

He shrugs. "Not those," he says.

The recalcitrant student who wouldn't put on *t'fillin* steps out of the van. I ask him why he went in.

"Curiosity," he grins. A college student majoring in journalism, he is not religious. His mother is Jewish, his father is not.

How would he sum up this experience?

"Interesting. I'll read up on it some more." He dashes off.

I am left with Yitzchak. "How many hours do you put in here?" I ask.

"Six, seven." He finds it a joyous task. "People want to know the taste of Judaism. Why keep it to ourselves? Let's tell everyone these great things. . . ."

More students with yarmulkas stop to chit-chat. A lady asks a question about ritual law. A man wants to know the exact time the Sabbath begins.

Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street is taking on a Jewish communal flavor. Bearded Chassidim, I see, fit perfectly. But ordinary passers-by have begun to seem peculiar.

The British Chassid strolls over just as two drum-bearing members of the Buddhist Hare Krishna sect drift past. Their skulls are clean shaven, eyes half-closed; they wear long flowing coral robes and sandals. A familiar sight to New Yorkers, this sect too haunts the Manhattan Streets, on the lookout for new adherents.

I ask my friend what he thinks of that?

"The world is full of crazy people," he says calmly.

The modish young man has now left the van. I rush over to interview him.

He lived in London for twenty years, he tells me, spent a year in Israel, is an engineer. About a year ago a mutual friend introduced him to the Rebbe himself. The Rebbe (who has been known to predict true things) gave him vital advice, told him not to enter a partnership; and later, indeed, it failed. "Now I see the Rebbe twice a year, ask him what I should do."

I point out that he wears no yarmulka, has no beard. . . .

"It doesn't matter," he tells me. "To them everyone is a human being.