

The Rebbe & President Clinton

A Historic Visit by a Chassidic Rebbe to the White House Convinced President Clinton to Risk His Reputation and Pardon Four Jews

It was less than two hours before he would leave the White House for good. In one of his last official acts in office, on the morning of January 20, 2001, President Bill Clinton commuted the prison sentences of four Jews.

Zman interviewed some of the activists who assisted the Skvere Rebbe and were involved in his extraordinary undertaking for the sake of pidyon shevuyim, freeing Jews from imprisonment.

William S. Clinton

Shabbos parshas Shmos 5761/2001. *Kryias Hatorah* is winding down in the *beis medrash* in New Square, New York. In Washington, DC, the presidential term of Bill Clinton has just finished. The new president, George Bush, has taken office.

The atmosphere in New Square is heavy. It is now 12:20 PM and still no word from Washington. It is hard to believe that the extreme efforts of the community's beloved Rebbe have not borne fruit.

Then, as the *haftarah* is being read, a commotion breaks out. Thousands crane their necks to see what is happening at the *bimah*. The Deputy Mayor of the Village of New Square, Reb Yisrael Moshe Spitzer, has just appeared to show the Rebbe a paper. Is it possible...?

The sound of a hand striking the *bimah* three times silences the entire *beis medrash*. The Rebbe's loyal secretary, Reb Yeshaya Ungar, clears his throat. Then, in a voice choked with emotion, he says: "We have just been informed that the sentences have been reduced...."

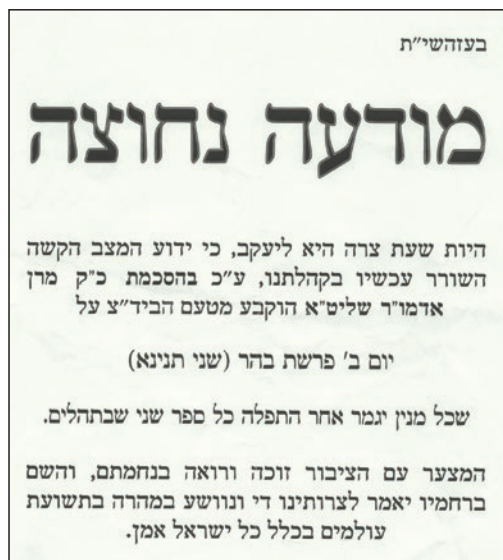
Difficulties with the Law

For eight years the community of New Square lived under a cloud of gloom.

The District Attorney of Rockland County was known for his tough stance against violators of the law. From the standpoint of many New Square residents, however, this DA had it in for them. It was personal. Others speculated that it was to inflate his resume by landing the maximum number of prison sentences. Either way, the New Square community felt harassed and discriminated against.

Ironically, several years later this same DA would end up disbarred after pleading guilty to two federal misdemeanor counts: tax evasion and misusing public funds. It would be the first time in 22 years that a District Attorney in the New York metropolitan area would be forced out of office for committing a crime. He would resign his office in utter disgrace.

His own misbehavior notwithstanding,



One of many such notices that hung in the *beis medrash* of New Square asking the public to recite *Tehillim* on behalf of the accused.

this man focused much of his attention on the community of New Square. At the end of 1992, he began searching for material for a court arraignment, checking through both institutional and private records for inaccuracies. After a year of probing, he handed over a large dossier of accusations to federal prosecutor Mary Jo White, US Attorney for the Southern District of New York. The main substance of the accusations was that the village had violated federal law when applying for government subsidies for its educational institutions.

During the winter of 1994 subpoenas began arriving on an almost daily basis for the administrators of the community's educational institutions. The entire village was thrown into disarray. The situation deteriorated to the point that a judge took the unprecedented step of appointing a non-Jewish "receiver" to operate the institutions. This resulted in the lamentable fact that the Talmud Torah and Yeshiva were closed for several days.

Reb Avigdor Ostreicher, one of New Square's community leaders, described conditions in the village for *Zman*. The tension was so high that the community might have disintegrated if not for the constant encouragement of the Skvere

Rebbe. First, he was consulted on a defense strategy for the administrators. Then the families of the accused as well as the community at large needed encouragement and support. And while all this was going on, the Torah institutions themselves had to be propped up so they would not close their doors.

To deal with the last problem, the Rebbe formed a committee composed of individuals both within and without the village. These men agreed to have the New Square institutions transferred to their names. Everyone knew that anyone associated with New Square was targeted for legal attack, and it was at great personal risk that these men agreed to involve themselves. Some of them invested large sums of their personal funds to ensure that the Torah institutions would continue.

In addition, the Rebbe created a new fund, Shekel Hakodesh, as an alternative source of income for the institutions. Deprived of government funding, their accounts had also been frozen and now additional huge sums of money were needed to cover the legal fees. Under the direction of Shalom Ber Fishel, the Shekel Hakodesh fund raised millions of dollars in donations to keep the educational institutions in New Square viable. Over the two decades since, Shekel Hakodesh has distributed hundreds of millions of dollars to support the growth of the dozens of *batei medrashim* and Torah institutions under the Skvere Rebbe worldwide.

Torah World Alarmed

Meanwhile, the accusations and harassment continued without pause. Remarks made by the prosecutors behind closed doors betrayed an anti-Semitic slant. Rabbi Ostreicher shared with us one chilling comment made by a government official: "We have let you live in peace for 50 years since the Holocaust...." The injection of open anti-Semitism into the situation was coupled with the openly antagonistic stance of Ms. White.

Throughout this traumatic period, New



R' Avigdor Ostreicher, *Rosh Hakahal* of New Square, speaks to *Zman*.



R' Shalom Ber Fishel, a dedicated New Square activist, with President Clinton.

Square's leaders attempted to reach some sort of agreement with the prosecutors. Activists tried every avenue, turning to any possible connection that might lead to a compromise. Meetings with government officials were attended by representatives of the country's largest Jewish organizations, such as Agudath Israel, in an attempt to mediate a solution.

New Square offered to pay back the entire sum of contested money and even huge supplemental fines. This was in addition to