

The Hidden Well

A TRUE STORY

BY BROCHA SILVER

It seems like just yesterday when my son Moshe first told us he was ready to start thinking seriously about getting married. And it was soon after the excitement of my daughter's wedding that the subject came up again. Moshe knew that after this wedding we had nothing left to offer but an excellent boy, but this didn't faze him in the least. He wanted to start looking for his soul mate and believed Hashem would help.

One morning, a friend called with a suggestion, and after my initial inquires about Malky it seemed she fit the description of what Moshe was looking for.

After their first meeting they both agreed to a second one. After their fourth meeting, they wanted to get engaged. And — because things had moved so quickly and all their meetings were taking place in southern Israel — we hadn't yet met Malky.

On the one hand, our hearts were bursting with happiness in anticipation of our first meeting with Malky and her parents. On the other hand, we were still reeling from the financial commitments of our daughter's wedding three months before. It explains the dread we also felt in anticipation of more financial commitments as part of Moshe's wedding plans.

The next afternoon found my husband and me heading south to Netivot to meet Malky and her parents. Looking out the window, on the highway leaving Jerusalem, we were awestruck by the beauty of Jerusalem spreading out on the surrounding hills. As the changing scenery flew past my window, doubts crept into my mind. I turned to my husband.

"What will we do when the subject of money comes up? Do you think it's right

for us to make more commitments when there's no way that we can fulfill them?"

My husband closed the book he'd been studying. "Remember," he said, "Eretz Yisrael is only acquired through difficulty. Why is that? Hashem wants us to grow in our reliance on Him. He gives us difficult situations so we increase our trust in Him."

I nodded, and thought back over my years as a devoted kollel wife. Memories flooded me as I recalled all the trials we'd faced while raising our family and how trying things had been for us at the beginning of our marriage; it had been several years before our prayers had been answered, and we were blessed with children. Then there was raising them. It was hard to believe that we'd passed all that successfully and were now helping our children find their life partners.

My husband was right. Hashem had always helped us.

He continued reassuringly, "Why should He abandon us now? Don't forget the story of Hagar. Hagar was cast out of Sarah Imeinu's home into the wilderness with her young son, Yishmael. Hagar was sure her child would die of thirst when their bottle of water had finished."

He paused, and then continued with emphasis, "It says Hashem opened her eyes and gave her the understanding to perceive that there was a well there, and it had been there the whole time. She had no need to seek water elsewhere; there was water right where she was standing!"

My husband's words went straight to my heart, encouraging me that Hashem would reveal our own personal "well" in time to solve this problem too.

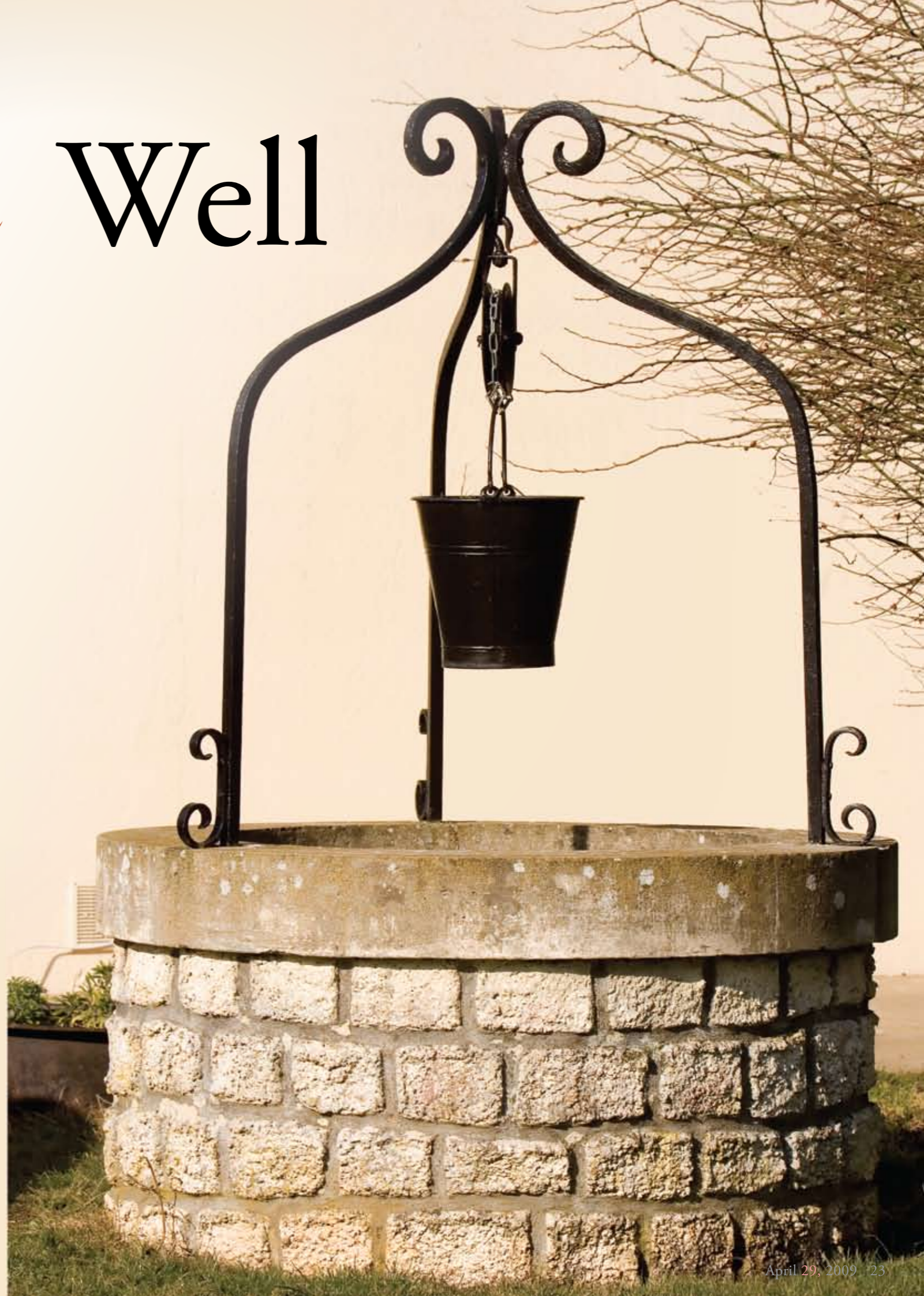
As I leaned forward in my seat to watch the unfolding scenery, I noticed how far south we had traveled. The land spread out before us with gray clouds forming

over cultivated fields of different shades of green. As we drove past one field, it reminded me of a print I had at home, of a poor black woman sitting and laughing in a field just like this one, except that field was in Beaufort, South Carolina. How happy and carefree she seemed. What was the secret of her happiness? I wondered. She'd obviously lived through difficult times and yet she was still happy. I guessed it was her religious faith that gave her the confidence I saw in her smile.

"'Who is rich? He who is happy with his portion,'" my husband whispered, reading my thoughts.

I was transported back to the sixties when I was a young photography student in a famous Manhattan art school and Robert Frank's *The Americans*, a 1958 milestone in the history of photography, was in vogue. Frank had spent two years traveling and photographing across America, recording his personal and sometimes cynical reactions to the country. As students we pored over the resulting book countless times. Those recollections led me to remember how the photograph of the poor, laughing black woman had come into my possession.

I remembered the feeling of excitement when as part of our end-of-the-year class project we interviewed famous photographers in their Manhattan studios. A friend and I signed up for the chance to interview Robert Frank. The day finally arrived and with his address in hand we traveled uptown to the Dakota mansion where he lived on the Upper West Side. Much to our surprise, Frank himself greeted us at the door and invited us into his studio. His wife joined in the lively conversation. After about an hour, right before we finished up the interview, I sheepishly asked Mr. Frank if I could have a sample of his work. Without





getting up, he swiveled around in his chair and reached into his file cabinet, pulling out with one hand a simple black-and-white print that had appeared in his famous book, and simply handed it to me. In disbelief I managed to thank him. At the time I didn't dare ask him to sign it since I sensed it was nerve enough I'd asked him for it at all.

Ever since, as I moved apartments and crossed different continents on my journey to eventually settle in Israel, that picture — carefully wrapped in a protective covering — has accompanied me. Since then I've rediscovered my Jewish roots, married a Torah scholar, and raised a family. Once a year, during Pesach cleaning, I reach into the picture's hiding place, pull it out, and dust it off gently, and then slip it back into its corner, wondering all the while what I could possibly do with a black-and-white print of a poor black woman sitting and laughing in an open field.

Suddenly, I was jolted out of my daydream. The bus had stopped. We alighted and the warm desert air met our faces with anticipation. After some inquires, we turned down a wide street. Two brightly smiling people opened the door wide, welcoming us into their home. They introduced themselves as Malky's parents — Mr. and Mrs. R. — and introduced us to Malky, our new future daughter-in-law, who was standing shyly beside them. I understood immediately why Moshe liked her. There was definitely something familiar there that put me at ease and made me feel that she was already part of our family. Then Mr. R. motioned for us to sit down at a table laden with all sorts of delicious dishes and fancy homemade desserts.

After lifting our cups for a final heartfelt mazel tov, Malky stood up, gave me a quick kiss, and quietly excused herself.

A strained silence fell.

Ribono shel Olam, I implored silently. *You've brought us to this point. Please help us find the right words to help them understand.*

Malky's father cleared his throat to begin the discussion we knew there was no avoiding. My husband looked at me for a moment, then turned to our son's future father-in-law. Without introduction he got right to the point when he explained our difficult financial situation; how we'd just made a wedding and couldn't possibly help pay for anything else. He paused for breath. I nodded in agreement.

Malky's father listened sympathetically. "Please remember what one of the great rabbis of the generation has said," he insisted quietly, "that it is very important that both sides share in their wedding expenses. We're already overextending ourselves by offering to pay more than half. We consider this an issue of 'You shall do what your Torah leaders instruct you.'"

I was worrying, but my husband exhibited pure calm and tranquility. He had no doubt that we'd find our "well" — and in time to meet our obligations for our son's wedding

My husband reassured him that this is how we lived our lives, listening to what the great rabbis of our generation have instructed us. And then, with a trembling hand, my husband signed. My husband had no choice but to leave things up to the Al-mighty as he proceeded to commit himself again to sums he knew we didn't have.

On the bus back to Jerusalem we spoke quietly, alternating lapsing into pensive silence. I was worrying, but my husband exhibited pure calm and tranquility. He had no doubt that we'd find our "well" — and in time to meet our obligations for our son's wedding.

We arrived home late, when the neighborhood was already asleep. As I turned the key in the lock and opened the door to our apartment, the phone rang. It could only be Moshe calling at this late hour. I ran inside to pick it up.

Moshe apologized for calling so late but he insisted that he couldn't go to sleep until he told us what a good impression we'd made on Malky's parents and on Malky too. He must have heard some hesitation in my voice because he proceeded to reassure me that he'd help as much as he could to raise money for his wedding.

"I also called to tell you that I've started to recite special tefillos everyday for livelihood. My Rav told me that people who've said these with the proper intentions have seen miracles."

"Great idea." I felt a bit relieved. "We'll also recite them. We're willing to try anything. Good night, Moshe,"

I whispered before I put the receiver down. I didn't trust my voice.

My husband returned calmly to his daily learning and I continued my routine of working in the evenings. The wedding was getting closer and we hadn't yet found our well.

After my children were grown and more independent, I had been able to return to my previous profession as a photographer. This time around, as a religious woman, I began to take pictures of brides before and during their weddings. During the last couple of years that I'd been involved in this happy business, I'd had various female photography students assisting me at weddings.

During our breaks, I'd end up telling them the tale of my unsigned photograph from the photographer that today's Israeli students were still in awe of. They were always impressed and agreed that without the artist's signature, the picture probably wasn't worth too much.

At work one evening my assistant and I sat down at an empty table. I was preoccupied with my own anxious thoughts about our upcoming wedding and all the preparations I had to accomplish with no extra cash in sight. But she insisted on starting a conversation with me, when I was clearly not in the mood to talk. I was vaguely listening when I suddenly caught what she was saying. She was telling me that Robert Frank was coming to Jerusalem for a rare visit to present a lecture series at her photography school, and she was offering to take my photo to her school and ask Frank to sign it after the lecture. I started paying attention, trying not to show my mounting excitement. This was truly amazing, I thought to myself. First of all, it was extremely unusual that Frank was coming to Israel. He was known as a reclusive artist who hardly left his home. He'd become famous for the photographs in his one book published many years ago and after that went into filmmaking.

I knew that prayer could turn dreams into reality. *It could be the salvation you've been praying for*, one part of me said. Another part of me recoiled. No one had wanted his book when he first tried to sell it. From what I had heard, he was known for having given his pictures away and that had lowered their value. And why would he be willing to sign a picture for anyone? It was amazing to me that this girl I hardly knew remembered that I had his picture hidden in my closet. I couldn't even remember when I'd ever mentioned it to her.

Looking at my pocket calendar, I made some quick calculations. I realized

that since I'd be working every night and also in the middle of getting my family ready for the wedding, I wouldn't be able to go with her to the lecture even if I wanted to. I told her all this so she'd understand the kind of pressure I was under. That was fine with her and she agreed to go herself. After managing to deliver the photograph to her the following evening, I became too busy to think or worry about it.

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All too soon, the musicians were packing up their instruments and the hall emptying as guests, friends, and family left. We stayed behind to pay the bills and leave tips. With a trembling hand I still managed to write out postdated checks, praying to find our well



Anyone passing the wedding hall in Bnei Brak that evening would have been impressed by the celebration in honor of Moshe and Malky. The culinary creations, the tastefully arranged flowers, the photographer, the lively band, and the enthusiastic friends of the *chassan* and *kallah* dancing in separate circles all contributed to the festive atmosphere. But all too soon, the musicians were packing up their instruments and the hall

emptying as guests, friends, and family left. We stayed behind to pay the bills and leave tips. With a trembling hand I still managed to write out postdated checks, praying to find our well. Besides what Moshe had collected, we'd taken out more loans than we could ever manage to pay back.

After *sheva brachos* were over, I went back to work and finally found time to meet with my assistant. According to the timing of her story, my husband and I had been standing under the *chuppah* with Moshe and Malky when she'd shown the photo to Robert Frank after his lecture.

"Frank was quite shocked to see the print after so many years," she told me, smiling. "He remembered that it was the only one of two prints in existence from that time and was quite valuable. I can't explain why," she said, giving me a puzzled look, "but with some behind-the-scenes coaxing from my friend, the organizer of the event, he reluctantly agreed to sign the picture for me."

The question was now what to do with it. I wrapped it up and sent it — with a friend who was returning to the States — to my mother. She had agreed to take it to the photographer's gallery in Manhattan.

"Everyone at the gallery agreed that your print is an original one from Frank's famous book," my mother reported, "and that until a couple of years ago, Frank's more famous pictures had sold for \$400 at the most. But one of the more familiar icons of the book sold last year at Sotheby's for an outrageously high price. I told them I'd have to talk to you first before making any decisions."

My husband decided to call his old friend Gershon, who worked in fine arts, for advice. Gershon said that an undiscovered picture somehow causes a higher price psychology. He offered to check it out for us, and wisely advised us to keep it quiet until he could assess the market. We waited for his report and tried to stay calm. The phone rang. It was Gershon. "Forget the gallery," he insisted, his voice rising. "Take the picture to Sotheby's immediately. I called the curator and told him to expect it. The deadline for entries is in less than twenty-four hours. If you miss it you'll have to wait months for another chance."

I placed a frantic phone call to my mother in Manhattan. "Hi, Mom." I sounded desperate. "I wondered if you

Moshe knew that after this wedding we had nothing left to offer but an excellent boy, but this didn't faze him in the least. He wanted to start looking for his soul mate and believed Hashem would help

could do us one more favor and drop the picture off at Sotheby's, please."

My mom raced uptown in a taxi, arriving just before Sotheby's giant mahogany and brass doors closed.

We began the negotiations with the auction house over the phone, and finalized the agreement quickly. The picture was already at the framer when I realized something we'd overlooked — the sale would be on Shabbos.

My husband consulted his rabbi that evening, who ruled that if non-Jews owned the company there was no problem. After all, we didn't choose for them to sell it on Shabbos. However, when he investigated the ownership of Sotheby's further, he found to his surprise that the owner was a Jew. This would mean a Jew would be working for us on Shabbos, which of course was prohibited.

It wasn't easy explaining to the disappointed Sotheby's staff. And since our debts were so pressing, it was hard not to be discouraged ourselves by the sudden turn of events.

"I'm sorry about what happened," Gershon said after we called him back, "but Hashem really loves you! I just heard some inside information that Christie's, Sotheby's main competitor, is having the same sale, but not on Shabbos. It seems that even though they're competitors they cooperate with each other and hold their auctions around the same time so outside buyers don't have to make two trips. If you don't get it there in time you'll have to wait another six months, so run!"

This time the urgent phone call was to my sister-in-law. She happily agreed to pick up the picture from Sotheby's and deliver

it personally to Christie's. She got it there just in time.

The auction was held on Friday morning but we would only know the results on Sunday.

Rashi says, "When Shabbos comes in we should consider it as if all of our work has been completed." On Shabbos we should imagine that we don't have any problems at all, and the happiness we experience brings joy throughout the following week as well. Everyone in our family was praying for the success of the sale and hoping that having avoided selling it on Shabbos would serve as a merit.

No one understood why anyone was interested in buying Frank's work except for a few collectors tracking down the pictures from the book for their private collections. The previously dark, rejected, and dusty picture of a poor black woman laughing in a Beaufort, South Carolina field more than forty years ago sold for the highest price of any Frank print offered at Christie's.

This time we laughed along with her — on our way to the bank. With this unexpected and timely gift from Above, we were able to pay all our debts with happy hearts.

When one loses something, saying the special passage of Rabbi Meir Baal HaNess helps recover it. The tefillah states that only Hashem can open our eyes exactly at the right time to see the lost object, which often is merely hidden from our sight. Like Hagar's well. And like ours. ■

