

HERE'S my STORY

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THE 29-YEAR-OLD CHIEF RABBI

RABBI YOSEF HECHT

In 1976, when I was a student at the central Chabad *yeshivah* at 770 Eastern Parkway, the Rebbe made an announcement at a *farbrengen* that he wanted to publish more writings of the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom Dovber, better known as the Rebbe Rashab.

The Rebbe Rashab was a prolific writer and there was a series of 146 discourses called *Ayen Bais* — written by him in the years 1872-1875 to lay out the foundational concepts of Chabad *Chasidut* — that were never published. But now the time had come to change that, the Rebbe said, going on to explain:

"For many years now, I have been troubled by the fact that many other *chasidic* discourses have been printed, while this extraordinary series never was. If I have the ability to publish it, and I haven't yet done so, I'm taking upon myself the responsibility for withholding these teachings from the public. But, for several reasons, I was afraid to publish [these deep mystical truths] until I thought of an idea..."

The Rebbe's idea was to publish these revolutionary teachings in partnership with his *chasidim*, and so he asked that each *chasid* demonstrate his participation by contributing one dollar towards the project.

I was among those selected to work on this project, and — together with my friend Rabbi Zusha Winner — was put in charge of making the index of the subjects covered in all of the 146 discourses. After we handed in the first batch of entries, the Rebbe congratulated us, saying that our indexing method "gives an orderly and positive impression." He urged us to continue to work as fast as possible but not to sacrifice quality.

He also told us that each time he goes to the Ohel, the resting place of the Previous Rebbe, he takes with him the latest pages we've produced, which helped to spur us on and kept us on the go.



It was hard work to make an index for so many discourses which filled three large volumes, and the Rebbe kept us to a tight schedule. One evening, the Rebbe asked us to determine when we would be finished — and he wanted us to submit the deadline before he went home. We hurriedly made a calculation of how much time we needed and explained that we were allotting additional time to index the last volume since it is not divided into chapters and "is very hard to categorize."

The Rebbe interrupted his audience schedule to give us an immediate answer. In his response, he commented on the words "very hard," reminding us of the Mishnah's statement, "*yogata umatzata* — if you work hard, surely you will succeed," and adding: "success comes together with hard work."

We indeed worked very hard and managed to finish the index on the first volume within two months.

And then an amazing thing happened. I was assigned a new mission which required me and my wife Tila Henya to move to Israel while someone else was appointed in my place to complete the rest of the indexes.

continued on reverse



EVENTS. IDEAS.
PERSONALITIES.

Marking 70 years from the anniversary of the Rebbe's leadership, each week,
JEM will be focusing on one event, idea or personality in the Rebbe's life.



We were to be among six newly-married couples charged with helping Israel in its spiritual and physical development. It was a huge honor to be chosen for this mission, as many couples had wanted to go. And it was probably the fastest *aliyah* on record because we were notified only five days before departure — so we had to gather our belongings and get ready for a move across continents in an extremely short period of time.

Once we arrived in Israel, we were located in Tzfat where we had a big impact, but two years later, in 1979, the Rebbe encouraged us to branch out across Israel and, if possible, take on rabbinic positions. At his suggestion, we went to Eilat, a secular resort city on the Red Sea. When, with the Rebbe's encouragement, I applied for the position with the Israeli Rabbinate, I was unanimously chosen as the chief rabbi of Eilat at age 29! This seemed to me miraculous as the rabbinate was then a rather closed club, and on top of that, I was coming from America and speaking Hebrew less than eloquently. But I attribute all of it to the Rebbe's encouragement and blessings.

After I got the job, I wrote to the Rebbe, telling him that we planned to move to Eilat after Sukkot, as my wife was obligated to travel to New York for her sister's wedding. But the Rebbe had his secretary call me immediately to say that I must start before Rosh Hashanah because that is the time when people are most receptive. The message from the Rebbe was crystal clear: "It cannot be that the rabbi of the city will not be there for Rosh Hashanah!"

Of course, I did as the Rebbe directed. I recall that, on Rosh Hashanah, I went to the local hospital and blew the *shofar*, and people — the doctors, the nurses, the patients — stopped in their tracks. "What's this?" they asked. It was the first time they had seen such a thing in a hospital.

After that, at the Rebbe's direction, I returned for Yom Kippur. The synagogue was filled to capacity and I gave several inspirational talks. I reported all this to the Rebbe, adding that for Sukkot I planned to return to Tzfat as I was still alone and I had no *sukkah*. The Rebbe's response: "Make sure you are in Eilat for Sukkot."

I did my best. I built a very tiny *sukkah* for myself and I ran around the city encouraging people to shake the *lulav*, which also was met with a very positive reception.

Meanwhile, I asked my father to take advantage of the fact that my wife and children were near the Rebbe in New York, and take my two-year-old son to a ceremony called *Kos Shel Brachah* during which the Rebbe distributed wine from his cup. My father did as I requested. Seeing my son, the Rebbe quipped, "What's this boy doing here? Why isn't he helping his father in Eilat?"

He then handed a bottle of vodka to my son — who was barely able to hold it in his arms — probably the only time that a child of two was asked to convey such a gift to his father.

The next day, my wife had an audience with the Rebbe who assured her that he'd already heard reports about me. "I don't know whether you receive the same updates that I receive, but if you didn't hear yet, I can tell you that your husband was very successful during these holidays. I saw your son yesterday and I gave him a bottle of *mashke*. Just so you know — he should bring it to his father. It is not for him," he added smiling broadly.

Of course, it meant a great deal to me that the Rebbe was pleased with my success that holiday season when we were just beginning our new mission. And over the course of the past four decades we have expanded our activities to the point that today I lead a team of over a dozen emissaries in Eilat. We have a number of Chabad houses, a soup kitchen for the needy, and educational institutions for children of all ages. And it is our hope that the Rebbe is even more pleased now than he was when I was just getting started.

Rabbi Yosef Hecht has served as the chief rabbi of Eilat, Israel, since 1979. He was interviewed in July of 2017.

This week in....

לע"נ ר' ישראל יעקב וזוגתו מרת קריינא ע"ה לאקשין

> **5710 - 1950**, on *Erev Rosh Hashanah*, for the first time after the passing of the Previous Rebbe, the Rebbe officially accepted *panim* — petitions for blessing. Despite heavy rainfall, he then stood at the resting place of the Previous Rebbe for three hours to read the notes and pray.¹ *29 Elul*

1. Yemei Bereishis page 242

Dedicated by **Menachem & Chavi Rubinstein**

in honor of their anniversary
and the birthdays of their children

In honor of our dear Rebbe

By Anonymous

MY ENCOUNTER
with the **REBBE**

While we have done our utmost to authenticate these stories, they reflect the listener's recollection and interpretation of the Rebbe's words.

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