

# HERE'S my STORY

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## THE PATIENCE OF THE PATIENTS

**MR. EITAN BEN-DAVID**

It was 1960, I had just finished my Israeli military service and came to the US to join the family jewelry business, which was partly run from there. I worked alongside my uncle in our Manhattan branch, where I had several customers from the Chabad community. One day, Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka — the Rebbe's wife — came by our office to buy some pearls. She came alone, driving her own car without any airs about her. I didn't yet know who she or the Rebbe were, but after finding out, I thought it was an honor to have served her.

I don't know how the Rebbetzin heard about us, or why she specifically chose to buy from us, when there were Chabad *chasidim* in the industry. My guess is that it had something to do with her deep sense of modesty and with her desire to avoid any special treatment or honor on account of her status. I believe she came to us precisely because we were not connected with Chabad.

I was impressed with our Chabad customers more generally: They were joyful people who always seemed to be radiating love. After a while, I decided that I would like to meet the Lubavitcher Rebbe. I had a cousin by the name of Aharon Shalomov who had himself become close to Chabad, and in 1962 he helped set up my first meeting with the Rebbe.

I arrived at the Chabad headquarters on Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, where I met the Rebbe's secretary, Rabbi Klein. He gave me my initiation, instructing me to write, in whatever language I was comfortable, a letter specifying my name and my mother's name, as well as the area in which I was seeking the Rebbe's blessing. Two or three hours later, I was called to enter the Rebbe's room.

This audience with the Rebbe stirred up profound emotions within me. On walking in, I handed my letter



to the Rebbe, which he read, looking up from time to time to gaze at me. When he finished, he gave me a blessing.

During that brief meeting, a curious thing happened. While the Rebbe was studying my letter, he raised his head to look at me and asked, "How is your grandmother?"

Whether it was out of confusion or surprise, I must have not answered clearly, because the Rebbe proceeded to clarify: "Your grandmother, she was a little unwell. How is she feeling?"

I replied that, thank G-d, everything was fine, while wondering to myself how the Rebbe even knew of her illness — I hadn't mentioned a word of it in my letter.

Subsequently, I learned that about a year before, when my grandmother had been diagnosed with her illness, my cousin Aharon had written to the Rebbe about it. The Rebbe had responded with his blessings, and also suggested that the family seek medical advice from two

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MY ENCOUNTER  
with the REBBE

An oral history project dedicated to documenting the life of the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory. The story is one of thousands recorded in over 1,700 videotaped interviews conducted to date. 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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doctors. In addition, she had once met the Rebbe before then. While on a trip to New York, the first thing she wanted to do was receive a blessing from the Rebbe, as she had already begun to feel unwell. It was amazing that the Rebbe remembered her, despite more than a year having passed. And I still can't figure out how he knew we were related in the first place — Ben-David is, after all, quite a common last name.

I went on to meet with the Rebbe twice more, and there were also several times that I wrote to him to seek his counsel or blessing, two of which I will mention here. In 1972, after we'd had our fourth child, my wife suffered from colitis. This was a very unpleasant condition and her doctors warned her against becoming pregnant again, under any circumstances. And so, when we learned that she was expecting, we immediately went to the doctor. He insisted that she had to undergo an abortion. We knew that, except in cases where the mother's life is at risk, Jewish law is opposed to abortions, but here the doctor had said that she was in danger. What to do? Obviously, we wrote to the Rebbe.

In our letter, we described the situation and the doctor's orders in detail, and included a request for a quick response so that if there was a need to perform an abortion, we would be able to do so within the first forty days of the pregnancy. (According to *halachah*, an embryo assumes a different status after forty days of development.)

The Rebbe's reply, however, took its time coming, and we began to grow anxious. We called his secretaries repeatedly, but to no avail. There was still no answer from the Rebbe. Finally, after the forty-day mark had passed, the answer arrived: "Do not abort. Please G-d the child will be healthy, and everything will be alright."

Of course, we took the Rebbe's advice and are very glad we did: Thank G-d, we had a healthy, wonderful daughter. Not only did my wife not go through with the abortion, but she went on to fully recover and we had three more healthy children.

In 1975, when my father developed a heart condition, we moved back to Israel in order to be near him. He felt terrible and was taken to the Hadassah hospital. Although it carried significant risks, he desperately wanted the doctors to operate on him; the pain was simply becoming too much for him to bear. The problem was that his doctor — Professor Mervyn Gottesman,

a prominent doctor who later became Menachem Begin's personal physician — had advised against it. He explained that my father's condition at the time was too fragile to undergo the operation.

We decided to ask the Rebbe what to do, but once again, his response was delayed. Time passed, and my father was sent home from the hospital. The doctor gave him some painkillers to make him more comfortable and instructed him to rest in bed. But then, the tables turned: The doctor said that the time to operate had arrived, but my father was no longer interested.

After Shabbat one week, just as Professor Gottesman was conducting a home visit, the phone rang. It was Rabbi Chaim Shalom Segal of Afula, with a message from the Rebbe: "Do not operate!"

Professor Gottesman, understandably, protested: "I am the doctor here! How is it possible for the Rebbe to make such a decision when he is across the sea and has never even seen the patient?!"

But the Rebbe said what he said, my father refused the operation and his wish was respected. Without the operation, he went on to live another nineteen years. There were other health complications that arose — but he never had another problem with his heart!

Mr. Eitan Ben-David is a Jerusalem-based businessman. He was interviewed in his office in October of 2018.

## This week in....

לע"נ ר' ישראל יעקב זוגות מרת קריינא ע"ה לאקשין  
ע"י בניהם ר' נחמן ור' אברהם ומשפחתם שיחיו

> **5716-1956**, after seeing some of Zalman Kleinman's published art, the Rebbe wrote to the young artist, urging him to create an entire album presenting the life and growth of Kfar Chabad, the Chabad village in Israel.<sup>1</sup>  
9 Elul

> **5741-1981**, after the afternoon prayers, the Rebbe pointed out to an individual that his grandson was wearing a shirt with a design that resembled a Christian cross. The boy later returned with his shirt bearing the symbol of Tzivot Hashem instead. "I see that you took care of it," the Rebbe said to him.<sup>2</sup>  
9 Elul

1. Igrot Kodesh vol. 15 page 395 2. Yoman Shnat Hakhel

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