

HERE'S my STORY

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WHEN PUSH COMES TO LOVE

RABBI AVRAHAM FRIEDMAN

My father, a survivor of Auschwitz and a member of the Carpathian Jewish community of Chist, passed away shortly after my fifth birthday, and two years later, my mother married a Lubavitcher, Rabbi Refoel Wilshansky. It was 1972, and from then on, we became Lubavitcher *chasidim*. We moved from Boro Park to Crown Heights, where I was enrolled in a Lubavitch school, but acclimating to the way of life took some time.

Along with a new school and new friends, I also had three wonderful new step-brothers. One of them, Itche Wilshansky, (today the dean of a Chabad *yeshivah* in Tzfat) had a special warmth about him, and he took me to one of my first *farbrengens* when I was still seven. His regular spot at these gatherings was right near the Rebbe's brother-in-law, Rabbi Shmaryahu Gurary.

The Rebbe would sit at a long table, and near the end of it was Rabbi Gurary's place, where he had a little table of his own. There was a ledge on the bottom of this table, and not knowing exactly what to do, I sat on the ledge, just above the floor. From that vantage point, I had an uninterrupted view of the Rebbe, who was just ten or fifteen feet away.

Throughout the *farbrengen*, the *chasidim* sang with great joy, and at one point, I remember the Rebbe turned around, zeroed in on me, and started clapping. I didn't quite know how to respond. Then, Itche grabbed me and lifted me up, helping me dance along to the tune the *chasidim* were singing. The Rebbe gave me a tremendous smile as he clapped, and when the Rebbe smiled, the whole room lit up.

The whole thing probably took just a few seconds, but that personal smile from the Rebbe has accompanied me all my life. Please G-d, it will last me until Moshiach comes and we'll see the Rebbe again.



Avraham (center) surrounded by his friends, circa 1975.

Five years later, on Yom Kippur of 1976, another unique experience brought me even closer to the Rebbe.

Spending Yom Kippur in the Rebbe's presence was an extraordinary experience, but the highlight came at the end of the day, at the close of the Ne'ilah prayer. The *chasidim* would enthusiastically sing Napoleon's March, a song representing our victory over any negative decrees facing the Jewish people in the coming year, or any impediments to our forgiveness on the Day of Atonement.

Every year, as they sang this song the Rebbe would stand up on his chair, his face aflame as he encouraged the singing. There was tremendous joy and energy in the air; it was an awesome experience.

Even people who normally prayed elsewhere wanted to be present for this moment and would come to 770 for Ne'ilah. As a result, we stood so tightly packed together that you could, without exaggeration, lift your feet in the air and remain upright.

continued on reverse

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.



continued from reverse

To keep the crowds at a distance from the *chazzan* leading the prayers, a table would be placed at the *chazzan's* left side, between him and the ark, the *aron kodesh*. To his right was Rabbi Gurary, who had a lectern of his own, and then, on an elevated platform, sat the Rebbe.

At the time, I was eleven years old, and with a group of my friends, maybe six boys my age. Being children, we couldn't withstand the crush of the crowd, so we stood near the front, in that little nook where Rabbi Gurary prayed, between the *chazzan* and the steps to the Rebbe's platform.

But even in that position, we ended up being forced towards Rabbi Gurary. The Rebbe always showed tremendous respect for his older brother-in-law, and at one point he turned around and saw that we were cramming up against him. He gestured toward us with his hand to tell us not to push Rabbi Gurary, and his secretary Rabbi Groner came over to make sure we got the message.

But what could we do? The only place we could go was on top of the table next to the *chazzan*, so that's where we went — all six of us.

But once again the Rebbe turned around and motioned with his hand that something was wrong. The problem, as I believe he communicated to Rabbi Groner, was that we now had our backs to the *aron kodesh*. (Incidentally, ever since this incident, it's been ingrained in me to never have my back to the *aron* when I'm standing near it.)

So, we went back down, but there was nowhere to go; and the next time the Rebbe turned around, we were leaning on Rabbi Gurary again. The Rebbe motioned with his hand. But this time he was inviting us to come up onto his platform.

The Rebbe's platform was in the front corner of 770, and once we were there, the Rebbe had us stand right next to him, nestled between his lectern and the southern wall. Standing right next to the Rebbe at such a holy time was so extraordinary that I still get chills when I think about it.

After a short while, the Rebbe turned around and asked for an announcement to be made. The call went out: "All children below the age of Bar Mitzvah who are old enough to pray on their own should come stand on the Rebbe's platform." At that point, from all corners of the synagogue, hundreds of kids came towards the front of the room, most of them passed by hand over the heads of the crowd, because there was no other way to go. With the platform quickly filled up, the Rebbe moved his lectern to the side, and told some *yeshivah* students to make more room next to the platform. But my six friends and I remained right beside the Rebbe.

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When the congregation sang, the Rebbe encouraged the children to energetically sing along. Being so close, we could hear the Rebbe as he prayed and during the *Avinu Malkeinu* prayer, we heard him cry intensely. Several times before, I had witnessed the Rebbe crying, at *farbrengens* or during the blowing of the shofar, but I had never heard such loud sobs as I heard then. As an eleven-year-old, I remember thinking that the Rebbe must have been praying to avert some calamity from befalling the Jewish people, ensuring that the year to come would be a sweet one.

It all left such a mark on me; the Rebbe's concern for his brother-in-law, and his concern for us. He could have easily sent us away, as someone might have in a typical synagogue: *Go back to your father! Stay in your spot!* No, instead, the Rebbe invited us next to him.

It crossed my mind that when he invited all the children to stand next to him, he was using the power of Jewish children, directing their pure prayers straight to the Heavens.

Since 1991, Rabbi Avraham Friedman has served as a Chabad emissary in Coral Springs, Florida. He was interviewed in April of 2011.

This week in....

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

> **5749-1988**, the Rebbe delivered part of an address to the members of the Machne Israel Development Fund (which provided financial support for the Rebbe's activities) in English. He asked the members to become "partners" with their local Chabad emissaries rather than "supporters," especially in efforts to purchase and erect buildings for Chabad institutions.¹
8 *Tishrei*

> **5750-1989**, the Rebbe spoke about his mother on the evening after her 25th *yahrzeit*. He then distributed packages containing a newly printed discourse of the *Tzemach Tzedek*, a public letter, a dollar bill and a piece of *lekach*. (The Rebbe was fasting that day, since he had gone to the Ohel, but he refused to take a break and eat until he finished handing out 9,500 of these packages over the course of four and a half hours.)²
6 *Tishrei*

1. *Torat Menachem* 5749 vol. 1 page 52 2. *Torat Menachem* 5750 vol. 1 page 61

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