

# HERE'S my STORY

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## A BUSINESSMAN ON A MISSION

**RABBI GERSHON LERMAN**

My family moved to Crown Heights when I was five years old, and from that point on, pretty much everything revolved around the Rebbe. We prayed with the Rebbe in 770, attended his *farbrengens*, and included him in our personal events. If someone was celebrating a bar mitzvah or a wedding, they would give a bottle of spirits to the Rebbe's secretaries on Friday. Then at the *farbrengen* on Shabbat, the Rebbe would call them over, mix some of his wine into the bottle and hand it over to them, so it could be used at the event, while giving them a blessing. If it was within the week after a wedding, the traditional *Sheva Brachot* blessings would also be recited at the *farbrengen*, in honor of the new couple.

At some point, however, maybe because the community got too big, people stopped handing in those bottles, and having the *Sheva Brachot* at a *farbrengen* became less common as well.

My wife Ella and I got married in 1983, the day after Yom Kippur. The following day we were scheduled to have a celebratory *Sheva Brachot* meal at a restaurant.

That day, Rabbi Hodakov, the Rebbe's secretary, called my father-in-law, Reb Hirshel Chitrik, with an inquiry: The Rebbe, he said, wanted to make a



**Rabbi Lerman at his wedding.**

*farbrengen* that night; would we be okay with holding our *Sheva Brochot* at the *farbrengen*? This was totally unexpected but of course the answer was yes. So, we finished up our meal at the restaurant earlier than planned and then we all rushed over to 770 to make it to the *farbrengen* on time.

Towards the end of the *farbrengen*, the Rebbe introduced the *Sheva Brachot* with an explanation. He began by referring to the great merit involved in participating in a wedding celebration, and then said, "Since last night — for

certain reasons which I was involved in — some people were unable to participate in a wedding taking place then, we should have the *Sheva Brachot* here."

My wife's grandfather, Rabbi Yehuda Chitrik, then recited all seven of the traditional blessings, while I stood right near the Rebbe. It turned out that there was another couple getting married that night, and so they also had their *Sheva Brachot* after we did. It was an amazing experience, especially since in those days it wasn't really done anymore.

In my mind, however, I had questions: I listened to a recording of that *farbrengen* a few times over, but didn't understand what the Rebbe had said. That is, I didn't see how the Rebbe had been involved in distracting anyone from our wedding the day before. The only thing I could think of was that the Rebbe

*continued on reverse*

MY ENCOUNTER  
with the REBBE

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continued from reverse

had arrived at 770 while I was under the *chuppah* on the side of the building, waiting for my bride to join me under the wedding canopy. In my wife's family, the tradition is for both sets of parents to escort the groom and then the bride to the *chuppah*, and so as the Rebbe walked into 770, they all stayed beside their car for a little longer. As I stood waiting, the Rebbe gave me a brief look, and then walked past and entered the building. I wouldn't have called that a distraction though; on the contrary, it was an honor for the Rebbe to be present at my wedding for that moment.

So, at the next opportunity, I decided to ask Rabbi Hodakov if he could explain it to me.

"What don't you understand?" he said. "The Rebbe wanted to give you a *Sheva Brachot* without making everyone else jealous." As Rabbi Hodakov saw it, the Rebbe's explanation at the *farbrengen* was only part of the story. The truth was that he just wanted to give us the *Sheva Brachot* and was looking for an excuse to do so. That special merit is something we will always cherish.

After the wedding, I decided to attend a *kollel* for married men in order to continue my Torah studies, while my wife taught in the local Bais Rivkah girls' high school. Although we were living in Crown Heights, we always planned to go out and serve as the Rebbe's emissaries wherever we would be needed. In those days, married men wouldn't normally remain in *kollel* for more than one year, but I had no intention of becoming a businessman. I really wanted to keep on studying so I could eventually be a rabbi somewhere.

After two or three years, different outreach positions began to come up, but whenever I put them to the Rebbe to ask for his approval, I received no reply.

Eventually — on the advice of a mentor — I wrote again, but this time in greater detail. I wrote our whole story: That I was learning, that my wife was teaching, that our parents wanted me to join my father-in-law's business, but that we wanted to serve as the Rebbe's emissaries in a particular place. This time, we immediately got an answer.

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The Rebbe advised me to follow the "advice of my father-in-law," underlining the parts about me going into business and my wife teaching.

We were shocked, even devastated. We had been excited about the prospect of serving as the Rebbe's emissaries, and never planned on staying in Crown Heights, but that was what we did. Slowly, over the next thirty years, we saw the blessings we received here.

We came to understand that our mission was here: myself at work, and my wife in Bais Rivkah. As such, I would always write to the Rebbe before taking business trips to the Far East, and I often received blessings from him. Meanwhile, the Rebbe encouraged my wife in her special position as a teacher. Even after she gave birth and had a difficult recovery, the Rebbe agreed that she should take a sabbatical, but urged her to come back to her job after one year. Seeing how the Rebbe guided and cared for each member of his flock was absolutely remarkable.

*Rabbi Gershon Lerman has worked as a gemstone dealer for many years. He resides in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, where he was interviewed in the My Encounter studio in October of 2021.*

## This week in....

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

> **5738-1977**, the Rebbe visited the resting place of the Previous Rebbe for the first time after his heart attack. Since the passing of the Previous Rebbe in 1950, the Rebbe had never allowed so much time to pass without a visit to the Ohel. This return to routine was seen by *chasidim* as yet another indication that the Rebbe was returning to his full strength.  
28 Kislev

> **5748-1987**, in celebration of the holiday, the Rebbe spoke publicly every day of Chanukah. The talks focused on the Torah reading of each day.<sup>1</sup>  
25 Kislev - 2 Tevet

1. *Torat Menachem* 5748 vol. 2 page 98

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