

HERE'S my STORY

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THE BUILDING SHOOK

RABBI ALEX STERN



My late father Rabbi Yerachmiel Stern took me to my first *farbrengen* in 770. He was a learned man, from a family of Alexander *chasidim*. Back in Poland, Alexander had been one of the largest groups of *chasidim* in the country, but it was completely decimated in the war. Be that as it may, he wanted our family to have a *chasidic* influence, so he thought it would be a good idea to take me to the Rebbes who were in New York. He took me to Satmar and Klausenberg and then, in 1965, he introduced me to Lubavitch.

I was about twelve years old, and we came in from Manhattan by train. We arrived early, and the place was empty, but then all of a sudden, at 8:30 PM a huge crowd began to arrive. This was before 770 was expanded, so I had to push and shove to catch a glimpse of the Rebbe. I remember that he had a small, blackish-gray beard. At one point, the *chasidim* were all singing the Belarusian song *Nye Zhuritz* and the

Rebbe stood up for a couple of minutes to encourage the ecstatic singing — as he waved his hand, the building shook. That was my first impression, and it was like nothing I had seen before.

A few years later, I was studying at the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School (RJJ). It is the oldest *yeshiva* in America, and at the time, it was on the Lower East Side, which is where we lived. A Lubavitcher named Reb Leibel Schapiro used to come by the *yeshiva* to teach a class on the Tanya, and he set up an audience with the Rebbe for my father and my brothers.

We came on a cold Thursday night, deep into the winter, and only got into the Rebbe's room after 1:00 AM. As soon as the secretary opened the door for us, the Rebbe got out of his chair and came to greet us, which struck me. He was extremely friendly, and when we sat down, he began speaking in English.

We were brought up speaking Yiddish and so, out of everyone, I interjected to say that — *ich farshtay Yiddish* — and the Rebbe switched to Yiddish.

Over the next few years, we met with the Rebbe a couple more times and we brought him numerous questions of consequence in our lives.

On one occasion, I remember my brother Avraham prepared a list of questions, one of which was about going to college. He was two years older than me and had started attending night classes at Brooklyn College, while going to *yeshiva* during the day. This is what almost all students at RJJ, like most other *yeshivot* of the time, were doing — there were just a handful of *yeshiva* students who didn't attend

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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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college — but he was wondering whether it was the right thing for him to do.

The Rebbe put on a pair of brown glasses, took out a pencil, and read through all four or five pages of my brother's handwriting, very quickly. It would have taken me twenty minutes just to figure out what all the questions were, but he put the papers aside, and answered all of the questions in about ten minutes, very clearly and concisely. The speed of his mind amazed me.

As for the question of college, the Rebbe was against it. He said that college could be a very bad influence on a young *yeshivah* student, as they learn non-kosher philosophy and other things that are anathema to Torah. He also mentioned the problem of boys and girls sitting together in co-educational schools.

In a later audience in 1968, my brother got it into his head to ask the Rebbe about the territories that had been captured by Israel during the recent Six Day War. Should they be given back to the Arab nations who had controlled the territories before the war? "That's going to be a bombastic question," I predicted. I was surprised that my brother wanted to talk about geopolitics with the Rebbe, and about such a controversial question in particular, but I was even more surprised by the answer.

The Rebbe became very animated, his voice rose in excitement, and he spent about fifteen minutes on the subject. "How can one even entertain the idea of giving any land back?"

He began gesturing with his finger, as if making an illustration of a map on his desk, pointing at areas here and there, and noting the distance between them. As he did, he explained how giving up land would put Israel in danger, which was a violation of the principle of *pikuach nefesh* — the overriding importance of the preservation of life. The entire answer was about the safety of the inhabitants of Israel; at the time, I don't believe he spoke about any special need to maintain ownership over the entirety of the land, in and of itself.

Since it was only about a year after the war, the Rebbe had not yet begun speaking publicly about this issue; we wouldn't have asked if his views were already well known. So, we were some of the first people to hear the Rebbe's opinion on this topic. Later on, he talked about it nonstop.

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Another of my brothers, Moshe Yaakov, had been a student of Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik in Yeshiva University. In those years, Rabbi Soloveitchik kept on speaking about how recent developments in Israel actually represented the early stages of the Messianic Age — the *aschalta d'geulah*. So, at another audience about a year later, he asked about that. The Rebbe rejected the idea out of hand, with a whole list of reasons. He argued that not only had the signs of the redemption listed in the traditional sources not transpired, but the period following the war was a time of dangerous darkness.

Despite the controversial subjects we discussed with the Rebbe, it was an easy conversation. He was very friendly and smiled a lot, and we weren't frightened or awestruck. I don't know how it was with *chasidim*, but to us he spoke like we were friends.

Each audience ended the same way, when he got up, he walked us to the door and told us the same parting words: "May we hear good news."

Rabbi Alex Stern lived in Manhattan's Lower East Side, where he worked as an insurance broker, until he retired and dedicated himself to studying Torah. He now resides in Florida where he was interviewed in January of 2022.

This week in....

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

- > **5725-1964**, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchok Bromberg, an author on Torah topics who specialized in *chasidic* history, had an audience with the Rebbe for an hour and a quarter. During their conversation, the Rebbe spoke about the deteriorating religious standards of certain Israeli academic institutions that identify as orthodox. 8 Tevet
- > **5732-1971**, the Rebbe stepped outside 770 to see off guests who were heading back home after spending Yud-Tes Kislev and Chanukah in the Rebbe's presence. The Rebbe also sent word that he would pay for almost all the travel expenses for visitors from Nachlat Har Chabad, a new Chabad community in Israel for recent Russian immigrants. 9 Tevet

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