

ISSUE | ערב שבת פרשת תצוה, י' אדר, תשפ"ג
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HERE'S my STORY

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SIDE ROAD, 2 AM, BE THERE

RABBI ISSER ZALMAN WEISBERG

When I was growing up in the '70s, my father would fondly recall the classes that his dean at Yeshiva Torah Vodaas, Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, would give on the *Tanya*. He found them fascinating and he encouraged me to study the *Tanya* as well. But when I opened this seminal work of Chabad philosophy, all I saw were Kabbalistic terms that meant nothing to me. Nor was Chabad philosophy part of the approved curriculum in the *yeshivah* I was learning in at sixteen.

One day, another student asked to speak with me in private. "Promise me that you won't share this with anybody," he began.

He revealed that once a week, somebody would come from Brooklyn — we were located in Upstate New York — to give a class. "I know that you're open-minded and have an interest in Jewish thought," he said, "so I'm inviting you to attend."

"At 2:00 AM," he went on, "we go out to a designated spot on a side road. Somebody picks us up and drives us to the location where we learn for a few hours, sometimes through the night. I can tip-toe into your room and wake you up on time."

My curiosity was sparked. This student was a bright young man who took his studies seriously so I figured that if he found the classes interesting, then they probably were.

It turned out that the teacher, Rabbi Yoel Kahn, gave an eye-opening talk about the soul, its connection to G-d, and why Torah study is so important. I had met Lubavitchers before, but in a superficial way; this was my first real encounter with the philosophy of Chabad.



Over the next few years, I kept going to such classes, and my appreciation and understanding of Chabad philosophy continued to deepen.

During that time, I also went to a few *farbrengens* with the Rebbe. Now, the *yeshivot* that I attended were intense places. The people there were very serious about Torah and serving G-d, but for some reason, the joy of Judaism would sometimes get lost in that intensity. Coming from that culture, the experience of a *farbrengen* — the atmosphere of learning, singing, and saying *l'chaim* with the Rebbe — was exhilarating. Two *farbrengens*, in particular, stand out for the way they transformed my understanding, not only of the Rebbe, but of Judaism itself.

The first was on Purim, 1976. Everyone was happy and singing, and some were even a little tipsy — but then the Rebbe started talking about how there are people who are stuck in prison, demoralized and stripped of their personal agency, and about the importance of visiting and bringing the joy of Purim to Jewish prisoners.

The thought of being troubled by a stranger who is not from your community, who committed a crime, sitting somewhere in a jail cell... it touched me to the core. *This Rebbe*, I thought, *is different*. I was determined to get to know him better.

But I still felt distant; Lubavitch was an exciting place to visit, but it was not my world. I was feeling that way at one *farbrengen*, when the Rebbe began discussing a difficult passage in the writings of Maimonides in great depth. To my surprise, he cited an explanation of the passage from Reb Chaim Soloveitchik, the great Lithuanian sage of Brisk,

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.



and then Rabbi Yosef Rosen, the Genius of Rogatchov, before going on to suggest his own solution.

I realized then that the Rebbe was part and parcel of the world of Torah scholarship that I was familiar with, even though there were other dimensions to him as well. It was after that *farbrengen* that I decided to come study permanently in the *yeshivah* in 770.

Even before making that move, there was something that had been bothering me. Since the Rebbe spoke in Yiddish, it was easier for the people who recorded his teachings to write them down in that language. But in the outside world, serious Talmudic scholarship was documented only in Hebrew. When I started studying the Rebbe's teachings, I saw that the difference in language and style made them inaccessible to others.

So, shortly after coming to the Chabad *yeshivah*, I wrote a letter to the Rebbe, introducing myself.

I said that the world was missing out on the Rebbe's beautiful Halachic and Talmudic insights, and that everybody would benefit if his essays were rewritten in a way that people outside of Lubavitch would be comfortable with. The Rebbe responded that it was a good idea. He asked for a sample of what I had in mind, and then told me to continue writing, once I had three people to review and edit my work.

I was given a quiet place to work on the third floor of 770 where I would translate and reconstruct the Rebbe's published essays. I would also elaborate on certain points, take some footnotes and put them in the body of the essay, and so on. The formulation of the final product was different from the original, although obviously the concepts were the same.

These essays would go out to Torah journals in America and Israel, like *Hapardes*, *Moriah*, and *Hamaor*, once the Rebbe had checked them over and given his approval. He was very accepting of other people's rearticulation of his ideas. Initially, he gave me a few directives of what I should or should not include, but after that, his editing was very light. If I would make a grammatical error or use the wrong word, he would change it, or if I used too much verbiage, he would condense it — he didn't like extra words. But on average, a ten-page essay could have just four or five slight edits.

The Rebbe kept on encouraging me to put out more, but I would spend a lot of time reviewing each subject matter and then on getting the wording just right. I could spend a month on one essay. So the Rebbe asked me to submit a weekly report on my work, and over the years his secretary Rabbi Leibel Groner would call me and say, "Isser Zalman,

the Rebbe is disappointed with your pace! He would like you to work a little quicker."

Normally I would select which of his talks to produce, but on one occasion the Rebbe asked me to write up a particular talk he had given on the topic of education. I felt this was a great responsibility so I asked him many questions about it, but again he felt I was being too much of a perfectionist. I didn't have to cross-reference his idea against every page of the Talmud, he told me; just writing it all up clearly was enough.

In 1985, I wrote to the Rebbe that I had gotten engaged, and in his reply, he instructed me to publish a collection of essays in honor of my wedding. It was an unusual request, and naturally I had a lot of other things on my mind, but I found time to do it.

Looking back, I can't help but think that the Rebbe was actually helping me by ensuring that I would be focused on Torah, non-stop, during that auspicious time of preparation for my wedding.

More generally, working for the Rebbe was extremely helpful in enhancing my ability to research and master complex Talmudic topics. The Rebbe may have had many goals in mind, but I hope he also really enjoyed what I wrote and felt it was productive.

Rabbi Isser Zalman Weisberg used to live in Ontario where he served as a rabbi in several cities and taught Talmud in various high schools and institutions of higher education. Presently, he lives with his family in Pomona, New York, and was interviewed in January of 2016.

This week in....

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

> **5714-1954**, escorted by several prominent *chasidim*, the Rebbe went to comfort the Kapishnitzer Rebbe after the passing of his sister.¹
10 Adar II

> **5732-1972**, after acknowledging that it is unusual for one to specify what kind of gifts they would like to receive, the Rebbe let it be known that in honor of his upcoming seventieth birthday, he would be pleased to receive gifts that are "first and foremost associated with an increase of Torah study."²
14 Adar

1. *Torat Menachem* vol. 11 page 119 2. *Torat Menachem* vol. 67 page 332

In loving memory of **Pessa Leah LaPine**,
of blessed memory, HY"D

פעסיא לאה בת ר' שרגא פייוועל הלוי ע"ה הי"ד
ב' אדר א', ה' תשנ"ב

By her family

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