

HERE'S my STORY

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ISRAEL'S YOUNGEST DEFENDERS

RABBI AVREMI KIEVMAN

Being privileged to grow up in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, as a child, I would see the Rebbe all the time. Typically, we saw him on Shabbat, as there was school during the week, but I remember how exciting it was when we would be able to go to 770 for the *Minchah* service on days there was no school. At 3:15 in the afternoon, the Rebbe would come into the synagogue, and he would hand us each a coin to place in a charity box.

One memory that stands out was in 1973, the Shabbat before the fast of the 9th of Av. I had just turned six and my father took me to the *farbrengen*, the public gathering that the Rebbe often led on Shabbat afternoons. We walked into 770 and went to our spot; my father normally stood towards the end of the long table the Rebbe sat at, on the Rebbe's left, while sitting me down on another table adjacent to it. The synagogue was a lot smaller than it is today, but being summertime, with children away in camp and families off in Upstate New York, there was more room than usual.

That summer, the Rebbe had spoken several times about the power of children, referring repeatedly to the verse from Psalms, "Out of the mouths of babies and infants You have established strength ... to silence the enemy and avenger." As the summer went on, he brought up the subject with increasing regularity, in public addresses, and in letters to educators and summer camp administrators, focusing on how important it was that Jewish children receive a Torah education and their power as role models. Now, as he walked into the room for the *farbrengen*, he looked directly at me, and then



Avremi and Dovid Kievman, 1972.

around the room. My father had a sense, as he later told me, that the Rebbe was looking to see whether there were any other children present: Something was going to happen with the children at the *farbrengen* that day.

Sure enough, after addressing the assembled, the Rebbe said that he wanted all of the children to say a special *l'chaim*. The way he put it was interesting: "If it isn't too much of an inconvenience," he said, as if he was asking something of an elderly person, "the children who are under Bar or Bat Mitzvah can come up."

On occasion, the Rebbe would pour wine for people to say *l'chaim* on, but never before did he distribute to children only, and as far as I know, it never happened again either.

My father pushed me to go up to the Rebbe, but since we were already so close, I was too shy to be the first. Then I saw Levi Klein, a good friend of mine who was sitting with his father a little further ahead, go up, and I went behind him; I was the second one.

The Rebbe had a large bottle of wine with two handles, and he poured some wine — just a drop, of course — into each of our cups, and then did the same for each of the boys that had formed a line behind us. With so many children away, it didn't take too long, and when he finished, the Rebbe looked up to the women's section. He asked for the girls to come down from upstairs, and then poured wine into their cups, as well.

In the meantime, word began to spread around the neighborhood. My father ran off to bring my younger brother, Dovid, who had been playing at home. He was

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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 person's recollection and interpretation of the Rebbe's words.



continued from reverse

turning four in two weeks and was too young to sit for the Rebbe's hours-long *farbrengen*. So how did my father convince him to come?

"The Rebbe wants to hear how you make the blessing on wine," my father told him. Dovid dropped his toys and went off with my father, running up Kingston Avenue towards 770.

By the time they had arrived and gotten back to our spot, however, the Rebbe had finished distributing wine and was already in the middle of another talk. Dovid, who was now next to me, didn't know what was going on. All he wanted was for the Rebbe to hear him make the blessing.

"I want to make a *bracha*," he kept on saying in Yiddish. *Sshhhh! Quiet!* The people around us kept saying.

"But I want to make a *bracha*!"

"Soon, soon," my father told him.

Eventually, the Rebbe finished speaking. "I want to make a *bracha*," Dovid repeated.

"Fine," my father told him, "now you can go up."

My brother had more guts than I did, so he just walked right up to the Rebbe. The Rebbe turned to his left, to see that this little boy wanted something. "I can also make a *bracha*," Dovid said to the Rebbe.

The Rebbe smiled, then took his own cup and poured a drop of wine into my brother's cup. The crowd had suddenly turned very quiet, so that they could hear the interaction between the Rebbe and this little boy. Then Dovid recited the blessing, in a loud voice: "*Baruch atah ... borei pri hagafen!*"

"Amen!" answered the Rebbe, along with the rest of the crowd. He was beaming, and the joy on his face was something I'd never seen before. He then waved his hands for everyone to keep on singing as they had been, and Dovid went back to our place. Soon, other children who had been out earlier began coming up. For the rest of the *farbrengen*, the Rebbe continued to give out wine between talks, answering *Amen*, and even helping some children with their blessings.

It was a very special moment, and I was always jealous of my brother; we had gotten wine from the bottle, but he had gotten wine from the Rebbe's own cup. On the other hand, my brother is jealous of me that I have this memory, while he was too young to remember a thing!

Two months after this incident, on Yom Kippur, war broke out in Israel. Then in retrospect, we realized that the summer-long children's campaign had taken place during the lead up to the Yom Kippur war. There had already been dark clouds on the horizon — the Rebbe understood that something was about to happen — and whenever things were moving in a dangerous direction in Israel, the Rebbe would try to preempt them by spiritual means. In this case, he was trying to use the power of Jewish children. *Out of the mouths of babies and infants You have established strength ... to silence the enemy and avenger.*

A few days after the war began, the Rebbe made this connection explicit: "What pushed me to speak about this idea so forcefully specifically these past few months?" he asked. "It turns out that we need to 'silence the enemy and avenger' now more than ever." Quoting a Talmudic expression, he said, "It is possible to prophesy without knowing what one is prophesying..."

Rabbi Avremi Kievman has served as a Chabad emissary in Liverpool, England, together with his family, since 1992. He was interviewed in the My Encounter studio in November 2021.

This week in....

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

> **5734-1973**, after a children's rally, the Rebbe stood for several hours handing two dimes to all the children and babies. He would normally have the money distributed via the teachers and counselors, but during this summer the Rebbe was increasing his involvement with Jewish children in a spiritual effort to "silence the enemy." Only later, once the Yom Kippur War broke out, did the threat that the Rebbe was trying to preempt become clear.
7 Tishrei

> **5752-1991**, in praising the vast activities of Chabad emissaries to spread Judaism, the Rebbe mentioned the "Book of Shluchim" — a recently published four-volume album containing photos of the families of the emissaries as well as the institutions they had established. The Rebbe pointed out that the album was beautifully designed — as every *mitzvah* should be — following the example of the Holy Temple, which was adorned with gold and silver.¹
13 Tishrei

1. *Torat Menachem* 5752 vol. 1 p. 77

לזכות

החייל בצבאות ה'

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