

# HERE'S my STORY

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## ASSISTING THE PAINTER

MR. JONATHAN NELSON



The one private audience I had with the Rebbe was before my Bar Mitzvah. Having heard many stories about him, it was a special opportunity to finally be able to meet such a great person.

He asked about where I went to *yeshivah*, and I told him that I didn't go to Lubavitch.

"That's okay," he said, and, after I told him about the *yeshivah* I attended, he went on to ask which tractate of the Talmud I was learning, and about my studies on the secular front. He also asked about my Bar Mitzvah speech, and while I only said a line or two, I got the impression that he was interested in what I had to say, and interested in me as a person.

Although I didn't learn in a Lubavitcher *yeshivah*, I do follow the customs of Chabad, and in fact my family has been deeply involved in Chabad for several generations.

When my father, Sholom Nelson, was growing up in Brooklyn in the 1930s, Lubavitch did not yet have a *yeshivah* in America, and so he went to Yeshivas Chaim Berlin for elementary school. But after the Previous

Lubavitcher Rebbe came to America in 1940 and opened a *yeshivah*, he immediately transferred to Lubavitch, where he was one of the first six students to enroll. He found that they offered a sense of inclusion, that they welcomed everybody and cared about every single student.

My father also became quite close with the Previous Rebbe's family. He recalled that the Previous Rebbe used to sit near the window in 770, and when he saw my father walking by outside, he would occasionally ask for him, or send a message to him through his secretary, to see how he was doing.

After turning sixteen, in 1945, my father was one of the very few boys in the *yeshivah* with a driver's license. At some point, a car was donated to the *yeshivah*, and when someone needed a ride, my father would be called on to do the driving. He would sometimes drive the Previous Rebbe's older son-in-law, Rabbi Shmaryahu Gurary, who was the head of the *yeshivah*, as well as his younger son-in-law, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who would eventually become the Rebbe.

Often, he would also take their wives, Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka and Chana, and even the Previous Rebbe's wife, Rebbetzin Nechama Dina. There were times he had plans to go out with his friends, but he would forget all about them once he got a call that the Rebbetzins wanted a ride somewhere. They would go out and enjoy public areas, going to parks, taking walks, and watching the water. Sometimes, he would drive them through Manhattan, or along the West Side Highway so that they could see the city lights.

It was a very interesting time for my father, in which he was able to become acquainted with the future Rebbe and his family. And, even after he assumed the position of Rebbe, this personal connection continued, while they also maintained a more traditional Rebbe-*chasid* relationship.

Once, in the early fifties, my father found out that the Rebbe wanted him to learn *shechita*, that is, how to

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



become a kosher slaughterer. At first, he resisted the idea: A *shochet* is expected to meet the highest standards of personal piety, and my father felt that he wasn't of the right caliber, that he wasn't holy enough to be *shochet*.

Through an intermediary, the respected *chasidic* mentor Rabbi Shmuel Levitin, the Rebbe told him: "I would still like you to learn *shechita*. The very fact that you feel unworthy of being a *shochet* proves that you are worthy of being a *shochet*!"

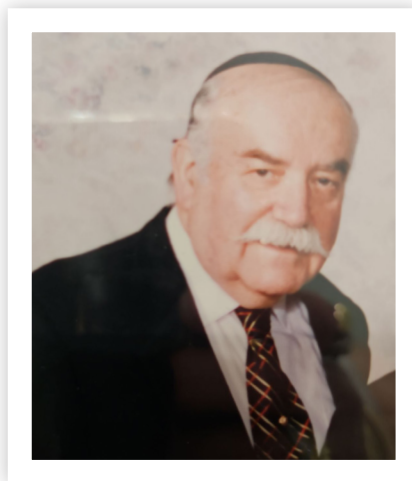
He eventually learned the practice and it wasn't long before it came into good use: In 1953 my parents got married, and shortly after, my father got a position in an Orthodox synagogue in a little town in Connecticut. The congregation didn't want to hire a formal rabbi, and so while he officially served as the cantor, my father took care of everything in the synagogue. While they were living there, my father was the only one who could slaughter kosher chickens — both for his own family as well as for others in the community.

Throughout my father's 7-year tenure there, in the 1950s, the Rebbe's office would often call him, at times late at night, giving him guidance and advice for working with the people of his synagogue.

My father would also produce a regular bulletin, and he sent a copy of every issue to the Rebbe. The Rebbe took the time to read the newsletter, and every so often made a comment on it.

For example, the newsletter included instructions for how to light Shabbat candles, along with the transliterated blessing. One day, my father received a call from the Rebbe's office about this. Although the general custom is to say "Blessed are You...who commanded us to light the candles of Shabbat," the Rebbe noted that in Chabad the proper terminology was "*Shabbat Kodesh*" — "to light the candles of the *holy* Shabbat." The Rebbe stressed that even those who don't use the Chabad liturgy should include this additional word when reciting this blessing. The Rebbe emphasized that it is worthwhile to publicize that this is the proper way to say it.

But my family's relationship with Chabad extends even further back. My father's father, Yosef Nelson, began studying in Lubavitch — the Russian town of Lubavitch for which the movement is named — at the age of nine,



Sholom Nelson

when his father sent him there to learn. While there, he too came to know the Previous Rebbe's family well, and he would frequent their home.

Although he received rabbinical ordination and served for a time as a community rabbi in his hometown of Babroisk, his upbringing in Lubavitch taught him to be humble and modest, and later in life, he preferred the title "mister." Once in the United States — he immigrated in the 1920s — my grandfather never compromised on his Judaism. He played an instrumental role in establishing Chabad communal life in America but, as for his professional life, he left the rabbinate and became a house painter.

His work as a painter brought him in contact with another side of Lubavitch — and the Rebbe.

It was at some point in the 1950s, after the Rebbe had succeeded his father-in-law. My grandfather, by then one of the elder *chasidim* of Chabad, was at that time working at a job — painting the walls in 770.

As he was walking up to the building carrying a collection of paint cans, my grandfather suddenly felt a gentle tug at his hand, as someone tried to take a few paint cans from him. He turned around and saw that it was the Rebbe, who had just come out of his car. Seeing my grandfather carrying those cans, the Rebbe quickly came over to lighten his load, carrying several of the paint cans into 770 for him.

As a finance manager, Mr. Jonathan Nelson has previously worked for JP Morgan Chase and for the past fifteen years has been working for an internet service provider. He resides in Boynton Beach, Florida, and was interviewed in June 2006.

## This week in....

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

> **5715-1955**, in response to the directors of Agudat Chabad of Israel who wrote of the need for another site for the growing Chabad community, the Rebbe instructed that they build "Kfar Chabad 2" in close proximity to the original village of Kfar Chabad. Kfar Chabad was originally established in 1949 by the Previous Rebbe, and serves as the center of Chabad's activities in Israel.<sup>1</sup>  
12 Iyar

1. *Igrot Kodesh* vol. 11, p. 88

In loving memory of our regal matriarch  
and beloved Bobba, Mrs. **Hinda Rader**

לע"נ מרת הינדא בת ר' שמריהו ע"ה  
who passed away on Monday, 5 Iyar, 5784

And our beloved Zayda, Reb **BenZion Rader**

ר' בן ציון בן יהודה לייב ריידער ע"ה  
who passed away on 10 Iyar, 5777.

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By their grandchildren

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