

HERE'S my STORY

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FATHER'S ORDERS

RABBI SIMCHA ZIRKIND

I was born in Queens, New York, and was educated in Chabad Lubavitch schools in Brooklyn and Pittsburgh. In 1956, after I finished high school, I consulted the Rebbe as to my next step, and he advised me to transfer to the advanced Lubavitch Yeshiva in Montreal.

However, my father was opposed to my continuing Torah studies, because he wanted me to work with him in his business. He had a small butcher shop, and he could not afford to hire any workers, so he really wanted me to stay.

Not sure what to do, he went to see the Rebbe to talk about this, and when he returned, he had completely changed his mind. In fact, he told me that he would be very happy to see me go to Montreal to study.

When I questioned him about this stunning reversal, he related to me his conversation with the Rebbe:

"Will you permit your son to continue his Torah studies in Montreal?" the Rebbe asked.

"I am not inclined to do so," my father answered, "because when my son will be so far from home he will not be fulfilling the *mitzvah* of honoring his parents."

"Well," countered the Rebbe, "if you command your son to travel to Montreal to learn, and he fulfills your wishes, he will be honoring you by doing so."

"If you put it that way," said my father, "how can I refuse?"

So this is how it happened that I went to study at the Lubavitch Yeshiva in Montreal, where I remained for seven years. During that time, I corresponded frequently with the Rebbe, confiding what was in my heart and asking his advice.

I remember that once I wrote to ask what I should do



when I felt that wayward ideas were intruding into my thoughts. He answered, "It is known that a little bit of light dispels a lot of darkness. So if you make sure that you are immersed in Torah — including Talmud and Tanya — and you can recite portions of it by heart, you will find your mind liberated."

At another time, I asked him if it was wrong to do good deeds for personal gain. He replied. "Keep in mind that many times the *yetzer hara* — the bad inclination — wants to keep you from doing good deeds by suggesting that what you are doing is for personal gain and not for altruistic reasons. This is how it prevents you from doing anything at all. So always remember what our Sages taught, 'Do good, even if not for the sake of G-d, for through these actions, you will come to do good solely for the sake of G-d.' Strive to improve yourself, but in the meanwhile, do not refrain from doing good just because you may lack the proper intention."

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 1300 videotaped interviews conducted to date. These stories are based on the recollection of the individuals recounting them. Please share any corrections, comments and suggestions. mystory@jemedia.org

At one point, I was struggling with a question of faith, which I confided in the Rebbe during a private audience. He responded, "When you leave my office, you should go downstairs and speak with the elderly *chasidim* from Russia about what they have been through. You will discover that despite much suffering and many trials, they have not wavered in their faith at all. This will give you strength to overcome your own doubts."

In 1964, I got married and we were sent by the Rebbe as educators to Tunisia. Though I felt poorly prepared for my mission, I had the advice of my father-in-law, Rabbi Saadia Libero, himself the Rebbe's emissary to Morocco. He told me that, when he first set out on his assignment, the Rebbe posed a question to him, "What do you bring with you to North Africa? The Sephardic community in Morocco is composed of G-d-fearing Jews, so what do you have to offer them?" Then the Rebbe answered his own question: "You can offer warmth and understanding. You can demonstrate the devotion that *chasidism* teaches. And this is how you will be successful."

I had planned to fulfill that directive as best I could.

On the day we left, I came to see the Rebbe who gave me many blessings for our journey and for the mission ahead of me. He also sent a *minyan* of yeshiva students to see us off at the airport. I still have a vision of the Rebbe standing on the steps outside 770 and looking after us as we departed. I turned around and I saw Rebbe atop the high step,



Rabbi Zirkind lights the Menorah

the wind blowing the coat-tails of his *kapota* back and forth. It is an image I will never forget.

Once we got settled in, I used to write weekly reports to the Rebbe about how the school we set up was coming along, and we would receive responses encouraging my efforts.

After we were in Tunisia for two years, the Six Day War broke out, and the Tunisian soldiers were mobilized to join the fight against Israel. It was a tense time for the Jews — for me as well, especially after I got wind that I was suspected of being an Israeli spy. I asked the Rebbe what to do, and he advised that we consult with Rabbi Binyomin Gorodetzky, who was Chabad's regional director for Tunisia, Morocco and France. Rabbi Gorodetzky urged me to leave as soon as possible and to take my family with me. So, we packed up our few bags and returned to New York. A year later, I was appointed the Rebbe's emissary to Quebec, Canada, where I've been for almost fifty years, helping to build the Chabad presence.

I feel blessed that the Rebbe guided me throughout my different trials and tribulations, taking the time to respond to my questions and concerns.

A long time Chabad activist in Quebec, Canada, Rabbi Simcha Zirkind (1938-2015) was also involved in the work of the Machne Israel Development Fund. He was interviewed in Montreal in January of 2011.

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

This week in....

> **5731 - 1971**, in response to someone who wrote that he is planning a risky surgery during the "Nine Days of mourning," the Rebbe wrote, "It is surprising that you want to operate during this time. It is worth postponing the operation until after the ninth of Av."¹ *Menachem Av*

1. *Igros Kodesh* Vol. 27, p. 197

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