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A MEMORABLE DEAL

RABBI MENDEL LIPSKAR



I grew up in a Chabad home in Toronto where, at a very early age, I was influenced by the Rebbe.

Before I ever met him, I knew the Rebbe was a force in the life of my family. I remember letters addressed to my father coming from the Rebbe, and the special excitement that entered the house when they arrived. My father never just ripped the letter open. He prepared for reading the Rebbe's words. He washed his hands and put on a *gartel* — the cloth belt worn by *chasidim* — and only then would he read the letter. Most of the time, he didn't share with us kids what the Rebbe wrote, but we could tell that it meant a lot to him.

From time to time, we would travel to visit my grandparents in New York for Sukkot, and there was always such great anticipation, because we would be able to participate in the Rebbe's *farbrengens* and possibly see the Rebbe in a private audience.

Even as a child, I distinctly remember the first time that happened. It was around 1954, when I was five years old, and although I certainly didn't understand the importance of the Rebbe, I could plainly see his majesty. So I was in awe.

I recall that he asked me about my studies. The mere fact that he gave me any attention at all — and also to my siblings, whom he addressed each in a personal way — indicated a tremendous sensitivity toward children.

I remember that at the *farbrengens* around Simchas Torah time, the custom was for the young children to get up on a table and sing a song. Afterwards, the Rebbe would direct someone to give us grape juice so we could say *L'Chaim*. It was a beautiful thing — to give the children center stage in front of all the adults. More importantly, he was also sowing seeds that would flourish later. The Rebbe wasn't just making a kind gesture by paying attention to children — the Rebbe was nurturing a future generation.

In 1960, when I was eleven years old, I accompanied my father to see the Rebbe, while my brother was attending Camp Gan Israel in upstate New York. During the audience, the Rebbe looked at me and, as if reading my mind, said, "By the look on your face, I can tell that you would like to go to camp as well."

Of course, he was totally right. "Yes, yes, I would," I replied, jumping at the chance.

"I'll make a deal with you," the Rebbe continued, and those were the very words he used to me, an eleven-year-old child. "I will make a deal with you. If you undertake to study two tractates of the Mishna by heart, I will ask your father to let you go."

I immediately agreed. I didn't realize how difficult it was going to be, and that I wasn't going to have much of a summer vacation after that, but I followed through. Now in hindsight, I realize what a great move that 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 1200 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@jemedi.org

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on the Rebbe's part. He was sowing seeds in my head and preparing me for the future. He was getting me to do more - to reach beyond my comfort zone, which would serve me well when, later in life, I became his emissary.

After completing my education in the Chabad *yeshiva* in Montreal, I came — along with other students — to study for a couple of years at the Chabad *yeshiva* in New York, and as was the custom, I would get to have an audience with the Rebbe on the occasion of my birthday. It was a short audience, a few minutes long, in which the Rebbe would give me a blessing, but it was also an opportunity to ask for advice or guidance.

That year, I was having great difficulty with my Talmud study partner — we were constantly at loggerheads with each other. Whatever he would say, I would contradict; whatever I would say, he would contradict. When I had a chance to speak with the Rebbe, I told him that I thought there was something wrong with me that I was arguing with this guy all the time, and I asked him for guidance in this regard.

The Rebbe said to me, "It would appear that you have a gift for *pilpul*." By *pilpul*, he meant the ability to analyze conceptual differences in the various Talmudic rulings by focusing on the apparent contradictions in the text. He encouraged me to perfect this method. And suddenly, a situation that had seemed to be quite negative appeared before me as a tremendous opportunity for self-improvement.

Now when I studied with my partner, I had a completely different sense of what our argument was all about. It was something positive — we were arguing because we were dissatisfied with a shallow reading of the text; we each wanted to find a deeper meaning.

When the study period in New York was up, it was decided that the out-of-town students — those from Montreal, Newark and Paris — would be returning to their *yeshivas*. The Rebbe himself explained this decision to us — and the fact that he went through the trouble was itself quite extraordinary.

He began by telling us a metaphorical story from the Zohar about a prince who was sent to a distant place — "*merchakim*" was the word the Rebbe used — where he'd be able to grow and develop much more than he would

have in the palace, in close proximity to his father.

Then the Rebbe spoke about the importance of serving far away, and I remember thinking what a privilege it would be to go to a distant place — to *merchakim* — as the Rebbe's emissary.

Years later, when I was on my way to South Africa to serve as the Chabad emissary there, the Rebbe sent me a blessing — via another emissary — in which he referred to me as going to a far-off place, again using this word *merchakim*. Although, he could have referred to me as going to South Africa, he chose that very word which had first anchored my commitment to far-off service.

A couple of years later, a similar thing happened. I was visiting New York before returning to South Africa, and in a talk that Shabbos, the Rebbe again referred to *merchakim*. He announced that there is somebody at the *farbrengen* who is about to return to his post in a distant place, and he has my blessing. The fact that the Rebbe used that specific word felt to me like a wonderful gift. That word said to me that the Rebbe understood what I was thinking, was paying attention to me, and was supporting my work as his emissary. It meant the world to me.

Rabbi Mendel Lipskar is the Executive Director of Chabad of South Africa. He also serves as the rabbi of the Shul at Hyde Park in Johannesburg, where he was interviewed in August of 2014.

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ע"י בניהם ר' נחמן ור' אברהם ומשפחתם שיחיו

This week in....

> **5741 - 1981**, the Rebbe spoke of the need to describe the times of Moshiach to children, so that they too can yearn for that time, as it is one of the foundations of the Jewish faith. This can be achieved, the Rebbe explained, by explaining it in a child-friendly matter, by mentioning the more material aspects, such as abundance of sweets etc.¹
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1. Sichos Kodesh 5741 vol. 2 p. 402

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by **Anonymous**

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