

HERE'S my STORY

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FROM FLAMES TO RICHES

RABBI SHLOMA MAJESKI

The events I am about to describe occurred in 1969 — in the early hours of the 8th day of Tammuz, which was Tuesday, the 24th of June. This is what happened:

A friend, Rabbi Elchanan Geisinsky, invited us to his wedding, which was taking place in Boston on Monday night, and I — along with a group of Chabad yeshiva students — decided to attend. How could we not?

Nine of us piled into a station-wagon and drove from New York to Boston, where we enjoyed the wedding celebration, and it was already past midnight, when we set off for home. As we were getting off the highway, slowing down to exit, a tractor-trailer going about seventy miles an hour hit the back of our car. The driver had tried to avoid crashing into us, but he was going too fast and couldn't slow down in time. His truck clipped our back corner, which caused our car to flip into the air. I remember waiting for it to land so I could jump out of the back window, which I did.

As soon as the car was hit it burst into flames. The middle doors jammed, and the three fellows in the middle seats were burned quite severely. One of those from the front who had managed to get out tried to help them to open the door but, as soon as he grabbed the handle, he burned all of his fingers. Eventually, he managed to open the door and everyone got out. Several of the guys had to roll on the grass to put out the flames still licking their clothes but, thank G-d, everyone was okay.

The state trooper who arrived at the scene was just amazed. He said, "I've been patrolling this highway for twenty-five years and I never saw a fire like this, with nine people packed into a car, and everybody coming out alive. And the fact that the gas tank didn't explode was just miraculous."



When this happened, seeing some of our friends severely burned, Rabbi Meir Minkowitz called the Rebbe's office even though it was five in the morning. I spoke with his secretary, Rabbi Hodakov, and I pleaded with him to ask the Rebbe for a blessing. His response was that I should check with the doctors first. If they said that somebody's situation was life-threatening, then he would call the Rebbe. If not, he would speak with the Rebbe first thing in the morning.

The doctors said that nobody was in real danger, despite some severe burns. We informed Rabbi Hodakov of this, and we agreed to speak later. When Rabbi Minkowitz called him, Rabbi Hodakov told him something astonishing. He said, "I've seen a lot of things while working for the Rebbe, but this I have rarely seen. When I told the Rebbe about your situation, he replied, 'I was thinking about them last night.'"

This means the Rebbe was thinking about us before the

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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@jemedial.org

continued from reverse

accident happened!

Rabbi Hodakov continued, "Earlier last night, the Rebbe gave instructions to publish five letters written by the first three Rebbes of Chabad — the Alter Rebbe, the Mittlerer Rebbe and the Tzemach Tzedek. Those letters had been written to communities which had experienced fires, and each letter contained a blessing followed by the famous Yiddish saying, "Nuch ah serayfah vert men reich — After a fire comes riches."



Rabbi Gershon Shusterman and Rabbi Meir Minkowitz inspect the wreck.

This Yiddish saying refers to a Kabbalistic teaching that there is an order to the spiritual channels with which G-d created the world. First there is *gevurah*, "severity," and then comes *rachamim*, "compassion" — this is what is meant by "fire" and "riches."

When Rabbi Hodakov told the Rebbe of our situation, the Rebbe responded by telling him that he had us in mind last night, when he asked to have these letters printed, and that each of us should be given a proof-copy immediately.

The following Shabbos the Rebbe spoke about the issue of fire. The Torah reading for that week was *Parshas Chukat-Balak* which describes how "burning snakes" attacked the Israelites in the desert, and the healing that followed. The Rebbe cited the interpretation of the 11th century Torah commentator Rashi and then connected it to our accident.

A few days later, in his talk for *Yud Beis Tammuz* — the Chabad holiday which commemorates the liberation of the Previous Rebbe from Soviet imprisonment — the Rebbe brought up the subject of the fire again. He

quoted the Previous Rebbe regarding his arrest: "Had I been asked before my imprisonment if I want to go through it, then I don't know if I would have agreed. But once I've gone through it, I wouldn't give up even one moment of that experience."

The Rebbe then said that the reason this accident happened to us is beyond our understanding but, since it did happen, we have to remember that "*Nuch ah serayfah vert men reich* — After a fire come riches." This means that the fire will only bring us more blessing. He suggested that we would be rich in Torah learning; he didn't mention money at all.

Rabbi Shalom Ber Levitin, who suffered the worst burns, was told by the doctors that he would be out of commission for five months, but he was supposed to get married two months later, so he was distressed. His father went to the Rebbe to get a blessing for recovery and the Rebbe told him not to change the wedding date. Everything would be fine. And, indeed, he got married two months later.

As for the rest of us, the Rebbe told us to say *L'Chaim*, which of course we did.

Rabbi Shloma Majeski is the principal of Machon Chana, a Chabad school in Brooklyn for college-age women who are new to the study of Torah. He was interviewed in the My Encounter Studio in August of 2015.

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

This week in....

> **5719 - 1959**, the Rebbe rejected the idea to print stamps bearing the image of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder and first Rebbe of Chabad, due to the disrespect which occurs when the stamps inevitably end up in the garbage. Additionally, the Rebbe wrote, the picture would be struck with a seal each time before being sent out.¹ 22 Adar I

1. *Igros Kodesh vol. 18, pg. 226*

In honor of our daughter
Hadassa Bracha's 3rd birthday.

By **Dina** and **Menachem Kranz** and family

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