

HERE'S my STORY

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THE DANGEROUS TRIP

RABBI BINYOMIN JACOBS

I was born in Holland to an Ashkenazi family whose ancestors emigrated from Poland. My parents were Holocaust survivors who went into hiding during the war years, and met and married after liberation. In 1964, when Rabbi Yitzchak Vorst founded Lubavitch of the Netherlands, they began their association with Chabad. And, through his influence, I went to study at the Chabad yeshiva, Tomchei Temimim, in Brunoy, France.

After I completed my studies and got married, I was considering various ways of making a living. One option was to become a kosher butcher in Germany. Another was to become the director of a girls' school in France. A third was to return to Holland — which is what Rabbi Vorst and my father were both pressing me to do — although there was no job for me there.

Unable to make a decision, I wrote to ask the Rebbe's advice. His response — "Speak with acquaintances in Holland" — suggested to me that this was where my future lay, since the "acquaintances" (my father and Rabbi Vorst) would only reiterate their opinion. But what should I do in Holland? Again I wrote to ask the Rebbe's advice. This time, he responded that I should look for work in a place that offered "the best conditions."

As it turned out, there was only one place in Holland that was prepared to offer me *any* conditions. But the job proved enriching in a way that I could never have imagined.

The rabbi of the small city of Amersfoort had passed away, and I was offered the pulpit. But it came as a package deal. I would have to become the rabbi of the community as well as the chaplain of the local psychiatric hospital, which was the only Jewish psychiatric hospital in Europe.

I had no interest in working with "crazy people" — that was the way I saw it at first. But when I learned more, I realized how wrong my original attitude had been. After nearly forty years, I am still there, and I wouldn't give it up for the world. It is such a blessing to be able to be of service to people with serious problems — people traumatized by war, children with learning disabilities, innocent victims of



mental and genetic defects. I feel enriched doing this work. This is what I consider the best possible conditions for any job.

After I had been working in Holland for a few years, Rabbi Mendel Futerfas came to visit. Reb Mendel, as he was known, was a famed Jewish activist who operated clandestine Jewish schools in the Soviet Union; for this he was imprisoned for fourteen years in the Siberian gulags. When visiting Amsterdam after his release, Reb Mendel saw a little Jewish boy riding a bike; the boy's yarmulke fell off, but he didn't stop to pick it up; he just continued bicycling on. Reb Mendel was shocked by this and declared that what Holland needed was a Jewish primary school to teach kids all the important traditions from the earliest age.

We got started immediately with half a dozen kids, and it fell to me to raise the money to establish a proper school. In the process, I approached a man who was known to be very supportive of Jewish causes. He had created an organization called Todah Rabah which would invite all manner of influential people — lawyers, bankers, politicians, Jewish and non-Jewish — to visit Israel. These trips were

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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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popular because, while these people were touring, they were also networking with each other, arranging business deals, government permits, and the like.

That year — this was 1983 — the organizer invited me to join the trip, saying that I could be a featured speaker and make fund-raising contacts for the school as well. Naturally, I asked the Rebbe's permission to participate in this event, and I got his blessing. It proved a successful trip for me in terms of making contacts and raising money.

Four years later, another similar trip was organized, and I was again invited to participate. And again I wrote to the Rebbe asking permission. But no answer came. I didn't understand why the Rebbe had not responded, so I wrote again. I began to wonder what could be the difference between the earlier trip and this trip — perhaps the timing was wrong as the trip came close to Purim, or perhaps the Rebbe didn't want me and my wife to leave our children behind and I should travel without her? I wrote for a third time, yet still received no response. Meanwhile, the organizer was demanding my answer — was I coming or not? But I didn't know what to say.

So, finally, I called New York, and I asked the Rebbe's secretariat directly. That is when I heard that the Rebbe said I should not go. I didn't understand why, but I obeyed.

A short while later, I received a phone call from the largest newspaper in Holland, *Der Telegraph*, asking me if I had joined the recent trip to Israel. I replied that I had not. A few days later I found out what terrible trouble I had been spared. Three or four trip participants were indicted on charges of corruption. Subsequently, they went to prison. It turned out that they had misused the trip — unbeknown to the organizer — by making all kinds of back-room deals. For example, one of the politicians took 50,000 guilders to secure permission for a hotel developer to build on land that was a state-protected forest. Obviously, this was criminal.

Had I gone along on this trip, I would have been smeared by association, and certainly would never have been appointed chief rabbi of the Netherlands. So the Rebbe's guidance truly saved me, as it has also enriched me and blessed me so many times in my life.

For example, there came a time when a problem arose for my family. There was no Jewish school for my children in Amersfoort, and they had to be driven to Amsterdam — a round-trip of an hour-and-a-half. But, with all my responsibilities, I had no time to drive them myself.

My father offered to do the driving, but I didn't feel it was respectful of me, his son, to impose on him in this way, so I wrote to the Rebbe about it. He responded with a blessing for my father, who was happy to spend the time with his grandchildren.

However, this arrangement meant that he was neglecting his own work — he was an optometrist — and so he decided to sell his shop and retire.

And here is the remarkable thing — had he continued to work, he would have probably gone out of business anyway. My father was an old-fashioned optometrist who was concerned with eye diseases; he couldn't have cared less about frame styles. But the optometry business took a huge turn towards fashion. Shortly, he would have been behind the times, losing customers left and right, and unable to sell the shop for much. But, because he put it up for sale when he did, he got a very nice price for it.

I believe this was a direct result of the Rebbe's blessing.

My father was very happy — it was the best thing for the family — and we are still profiting from that sale today.

Rabbi Binyomin Jacobs has served as acting chief rabbi of the Netherlands from 1984 to 2008, when he was appointed chief rabbi, a position he fills today. He was interviewed in the My Encounter Studio in November of 2015.

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

This week in....

> **5734 - 1974**, the Rebbe urged Mr. Yosef Ciechanover, legal attaché to Israel's Minister of Defense from leaving his post. The Rebbe pointed out, that Israel's situation demands that any instability to its security apparatus must be avoided at all cost. Especially considering his stature and tenure, it is necessary that he continue — at least as long as the present Defense Minister, Moshe Dayan, stays in power. Leaving sooner than that, the Rebbe wrote, might weaken the effectiveness of Israel's Ministry of Defense.¹ 17 Adar

1. *Igros Kodesh* vol. 24, p. 75

In honor of my brother

Yossi and Chani Cousin and Family

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