

HERE'S my STORY

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NOTHING TO FEAR

RABBI KOPPEL BACHER

I grew up in South Africa, the son of an immigrant who came from a well-known Lubavitch family in Rokiskis, Lithuania — the Ruch family with whom the Previous Rebbe stayed in 1930 while visiting his followers residing there. True to his roots, my father was very attached to the Previous Rebbe and often sought his counsel.

For example, there came a time, in 1946, when my father was thinking of selling his cattle farm. He had been offered a very good price for it and, as he was strapped for cash, he thought this might be a good idea, but he wasn't sure. He decided to ask the Previous Rebbe's advice. The Rebbe's answer came back that he should hold onto the property. That proved to be the right thing to do because two years later, he was offered much, much more — fifty thousand South African pounds — and this time the Rebbe said he should go forward with the sale.

In 1950, the Previous Rebbe passed away, a loss which my father felt deeply. However, he continued his connection to the new Rebbe and in 1955, when I was fourteen years old, he decided to send me to New York, to the Chabad yeshiva there. After two years I transferred to the Chabad yeshiva in Montreal, where I stayed for five more years.

I had not intended to study for so long. In fact, I wanted badly to return to South Africa, but the Rebbe urged me to stay put. He wrote me a heartfelt letter in which he praised my efforts as a student — something which surprised me because I did not consider myself to be among the top learners, to say the least — and explained that I was in my most formative years and, therefore, should continue learning without interruption. He said he understood that it was hard for my parents not to see me for so long, but that, in the end, they would take great pride in my accomplishments.

Of course, the Rebbe was right — these were my formative years and I was greatly influenced by the elder Chassidim who mentored me in Montreal —



particularly Rabbi Hershel Feigelstock and Rabbi Menachem Zev Greenglass.

Years later, Rabbi Greenglass told me an amazing story. He said that there came a time when he went to see the Rebbe and expressed some disillusionment with his job as a teacher. In the course of the conversation, he asked rhetorically, "Was it worth it?"

The Rebbe responded, "Of course it was worth it. For Koppel Bacher alone, it was worth it!" I am paraphrasing here — I don't know the exactly the words the Rebbe used — but this is what Rabbi Greenglass told me on the occasion of his 90th birthday.

While I was studying in Montreal, it was the custom for the yeshiva students to travel to New York for the holidays. I recall one such occasion when we came for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and the Rebbe made an unusual request of me.

It seems that a distant relative of my father — I believe she was the sister of Rabbi Pesach Ruch, in whose home the Previous Rebbe had stayed in Rokiskis —

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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

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had written to the Rebbe. She'd migrated to Cleveland and had heard that I was learning in a Chabad yeshiva, so she asked the Rebbe to send me her regards.

On Erev Yom Kippur, the Rebbe's secretary, Rabbi Hodakov, called me into his office and told me this, and also that the Rebbe wished that I write to her.

We were hours from the most holy day of the year, and yet the Rebbe was concerned that I receive her message and that I be respectful of this elderly relative.

In 1961, I returned to South Africa and, a year later, I received a letter from the Rebbe advising me that it was time to look for a marriage match. He was on top of everything that was happening with every one of his Chassidim.

From that point on I had to report to Rabbi Hodakov on how my search for a wife was progressing. When he heard that a suitable match had been proposed for me, he immediately asked, "So why aren't you doing anything about it? I want you to go right now and arrange a meeting." So I went to a telephone booth and did as he instructed.

When we got married, we came to New York for an audience with the Rebbe, along with my mother and in-laws. After the wedding, we returned to South Africa to serve as Chabad emissaries in Johannesburg.

Over the years, I would usually come to New York during Sukkot and, time after time, I would be called up to the Torah on Hoshanah Rabbah. But one year the plane was delayed, and I missed the prayer service. Later, when I saw the Rebbe, he said to me, "I missed you this morning — I didn't see you being called to the Torah."

That's when I realized that this is why I came every year — to be reminded how much the Rebbe paid attention to and cared for all of his Chassidim, to feel



Rabbi Menachem Zev Greenglass in his youth

that closeness that I needed to feel as his emissary.

Of course, I brought my children also. I wanted to expose them to the Rebbe from the earliest age. I first took my son, Shauli, when he was only five years old, and the Rebbe scrounged around in his desk drawer until he came up with a silver dollar. He gave Shauli the coin and said, "I'm giving you Chanukah gelt right now because you won't be here for Chanukah."

During the unrest in South Africa — before the apartheid regime fell — people were emigrating out of South Africa en masse. But the Rebbe told me to advise the community to stay put, adding "Give over this message to your community, *'m'zol zich nit shreken* — there is nothing to fear."

Once I heard those words from the Rebbe, how could I be afraid? Even though I had an AK-47 pointed at my head, and five times our office came under attack — each time I was tied up and robbed — I always remembered that the Rebbe had said "there is nothing to fear," and I knew that I would come to no harm.

Once a robber confronted me with, "Who's gonna look after your kids if we kill you now?" And I just closed my eyes and pictured the Rebbe saying "*m'zol zich nit shreken*." I was a Chassid of the Rebbe, and I knew he was looking after me in that moment, as he had my entire life. The proof is that I am here to tell this story.

Rabbi Koppel Bacher has been an influential leader of the South African Jewish community for over 50 years. He was interviewed in Brooklyn in October of 2010.

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

This week in....

> **5748 - 1988**, after *Mincha* in the Rebbe's house, the Rebbe delivered a talk where he explained how *Chassidim* can mark *Behab* (the three traditional fast days after Sukkos and Pesach) today by studying Torah and performing *mitzvos* joyfully, rather than by actually fasting.¹ 8 Iyar

1. *Hisva'aduyos* 5748, vol. 3, pg. 257-273

Dedicated in loving memory of

Reb **Moshe Freundlich**, OBM

הרה"ח ר' משה בן ר' שלמה ז"ל

Yahrtzeit, 10 Nissan

By **Danny** and **Chana Sara Freundlich**

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