

# HERE'S my STORY

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## "I HAVE A PROMISE"

**RABBI YITZCHOK ARNOLD**



On this occasion, my grandfather, Rabbi Yechiel Tarshish, had summoned me to East New York, where he lived, to show me a letter he had received from his nephew's wife in Israel. She wrote that her husband, whose name was Menachem Mendel, the son of Chana, was experiencing terrible headaches. The doctors had determined that this was the result of an injury he received during the war. He had been captured by the Germans, and a soldier hit him in the head with the butt of his rifle. He fell down and others carried him away. Somehow he survived, migrated to Israel after the war and got married there. But now he was having these blinding headaches and the doctors were recommending very risky surgery, which would either remedy the situation or send him into a vegetative state. My grandfather wanted me to ask for a blessing from the Rebbe.

I did; the Rebbe gave his blessing, and the operation was successful — everything turned out well.

Some time later, as I was walking out of 770 Eastern Parkway and the Rebbe was coming in, he turned to me and asked, "What happened with Menachem Mendel ben Chana?"

I didn't know what he was talking about; I had forgotten all about it.

He repeated, "What happened with Menachem Mendel ben Chana in *Eretz Yisrael*? What happened with his operation?"

So then it came to me, and I said, "My grandfather told me that the operation was a success."

"It seems that when things go wrong people rush to inform me," the Rebbe responded, "but when things go well, I never hear about it."

I felt like I wanted the earth to open up and swallow me alive. I was so embarrassed. It was my responsibility to inform the Rebbe, and I had totally neglected it. The Rebbe also wanted to hear good news — of course he did — especially about a man who was his namesake.

In 1958, while I was still in *yeshivah*, the Rebbe instructed me (along with about a dozen others) to go study in

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**M**y first encounter with the Rebbe — long before he became the Rebbe — was during a Sukkot gathering in 1941. He was speaking in the *sukkah*, though I don't remember what about. But I do remember the dancing. At the time I was just a kid, twelve years old, and I was hanging around the edge of the crowd when, suddenly, I felt a hand pull me from behind. When I turned around I saw it was the Rebbe — who urged me to join in the dancing, which I did.

Over the next ten years, before he assumed leadership of Chabad Lubavitch, I had a chance to observe him many times from a youngster's point of view. And what impressed me was how he related to his mother. She came to America in 1947, and I recall him walking with her, letting her arm rest on his arm as she climbed the stairs. This tender moment between them has stayed in my mind.

During the years I was a student in the Chabad *yeshivah*, many amazing things happened that demonstrated the power of the Rebbe's blessings. I recall one particular incident that involved a distant relative.

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 1400 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](mailto:mystory@jemedi.org)

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Israel for two years, which I did. It was there that I met my wife and got married. Afterwards, we returned to the United States where I took up various teaching positions, ending up in Los Angeles.

But, after five years of married life, we still had no children. And my wife remembered a letter she wrote to the Rebbe long before, when she was a bride, about covering her hair as a married woman. At that time, the Rebbe had answered her, "If you cover your hair with a wig, as a married woman should, you will have children."

She took that letter with her when she went to see the Rebbe to ask for a blessing. She put the letter on the table and said, "I have a promise." And then she burst into tears.

The Rebbe recommended a particular fertility clinic, where he suggested she see a doctor whose name he provided. We went there and, fourteen months later, our first son, Shlomo, was born.



Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim in 770 during the early 1940s

When he was just a few months old, he began waking up in the middle of the night and crying. The doctor said he was fine, so I wrote to the Rebbe, who responded with instructions that we should check the *mezuzah* on the door. I took the *mezuzah* down and brought it to a scribe, who asked me, "Who rolled this *mezuzah* scroll?" I said, "I did." He shook his head because I hadn't rolled it at all, I had folded it, and when I did that, I caused a crack in the word *veshachbecha* which means "when you lie down." Naturally, I bought a new *mezuzah* scroll, and Shlomo was just fine after that.

In 1979, while I was still teaching high school, the Rebbe

began to speak about the importance of the elderly, and how important it was to focus on them. I was given an assignment to visit various institutions — such as old age homes and senior hotels — to connect with the elders. I was successful at this, at times visiting as many as twenty facilities in the Los Angeles area. I taught basic Hebrew and how to read the *Siddur*, the Jewish prayer-book. After a while, I also added a class on the Torah portion of the week.

At this time, I had an audience with the Rebbe and I complained to him that people can't relate to the Torah; they are always asking me what it has to do with modern day. In response, the Rebbe gave me this advice, "Go out and buy the local paper, read up on current events, and surely you will find something."

The other advice he gave me was not to push these people to become religious. I had mentioned that I encouraged the women to light Shabbat candles, and while I was at it, I decided to put *tefillin* on the men. He approved but he also said, "Don't push. Take it slow. Let people come around, little by little, on their own."

And sure enough, because of this, I was able to be influential in places previously closed off to me. There were times that I would spend over an hour helping elderly men put on *tefillin*, who had previously refused. The approach the Rebbe taught me helped me make a difference to so many of their lives.

*Rabbi Yitzchok Arnold co-directs Kolel Tiferet Zkanim Levi Yitzchok, a synagogue for the elderly, in Los Angeles, California where he was interviewed in September of 2011.*

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## This week in...

> **5725- 1964**, former Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy visited the Rebbe for an audience during his run for the U.S. Senate. As he was discussing parochial schools with the Rebbe, Mr. Kennedy noted that he had eight children, to which the Rebbe interjected, "Yes, but I have two hundred thousand."<sup>1</sup>  
*26 Tishrei*

1. *Seeds of Wisdom* Pg. 129

In memory of the noted educator  
Rabbi **Isaac Mintz**  
On the occasion of his *yahrzeit*  
2 Cheshvan

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