

HERE'S my STORY

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A SPECIAL GREETING

MRS. PAULA BURG

I grew up in Irvington, New Jersey, in a traditional Jewish family that was not fully Torah observant. But, in 1973, when I was twelve, thanks to my cousin Avraham, who had become religious, I began to explore Judaism in depth. It began when he dared me to keep just one Shabbat. I rose to the challenge and thus began my journey to a Torah life.

Because of my cousin, I was invited to Shabbat lunch with the family of Rabbi Sholom Gordon, the Chabad rabbi in Maplewood, who showed me what it was all about. I remember sitting at their table for the first time — never having seen a table set like that with a white tablecloth and beautiful china — and I remember the blessings, the songs, the words of Torah. I told myself then that I wanted to have a table of my own just like this someday.

After that, Mrs. Gordon took me under her wing, teaching me basic laws and prayers, and sometimes arranging for me to spend Shabbat with her sister, Mrs. Goldman, in Crown Heights.

Crown Heights was a different planet altogether — the Chabad people there dressed much more modestly, and I purchased a set of special clothes which I would take along to wear there.

One Shabbat — it was *Shabbos Mevarchim* when blessings on the upcoming new month are recited — Mrs. Goldman urged me to go to Chabad Headquarters and see what a *farbrengen* with the Rebbe looked like. I went with my best friend Cheryl, and it was an amazing experience.

The place was very crowded, but the women saw that we were from out of town, so they pushed us up front where we could see and hear the Rebbe. Although we didn't understand a word of what he was saying, it was still very impressive, especially the heartfelt singing between the Rebbe's talks.

This event went on for a long time so, after a couple of hours, we decided to take a walk. I remember that it was a beautiful spring day. Out on Eastern Parkway, some people who were not Jewish were taking pictures of a bride, and



Rabbi Sholom Gordon

we watched them for a while, enjoying ourselves.

As we were returning — I remember we were talking and laughing — we suddenly saw a sea of black in front of us. A large group of *chasidim* was coming towards us, singing as they marched. Apparently, they were escorting the Rebbe home after the *farbrengen*.

In our young minds, we were in big trouble! We knew this was not where we should be, and we were about to be caught. So, we ducked into a little alley between houses, hoping they hadn't spotted us.

But they had. Or at least the Rebbe had.

When he came to where we had hidden ourselves, holding each other's hands and giggling, he stopped. And when he stopped, the entire entourage stopped also. Suddenly all was quiet, and I remember thinking, "Oh no, this is not good."

The Rebbe continued walking over to where we were standing, and he just looked at us. I remember his piercing eyes as if it was yesterday. And then he gave us a little bow and, with a smile, he said, "*Gut Shabbos*." After a few

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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 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

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seconds he resumed walking, with his entourage following as if nothing had happened.

We were stunned. We didn't know what to do, so we went back to Mrs. Goldman's house, where the family had already heard all about it. And everyone wanted to know what the Rebbe said to us. What could we say? The Rebbe said, "Gut Shabbos." Nothing more.

But really, it was a lot more. Through that simple gesture he conveyed to us the importance of greeting people who may be a little nervous or who feel out of place — a kind word and a smile, such small things, can make such a big difference. That is what that moment taught Cheryl and me. Although it was many years ago, and today we are grandmothers, that very special Shabbat moment continues to influence us.

The other story about the Rebbe that I would like to relate happened many years later, when I was married with children. My son, Avraham Yehudah, who was in second grade at the time, was sick a lot and missing many school days. He would have coughing fits that did not respond to medication, and the doctors couldn't figure out exactly what was wrong with him. And he was getting worse.

We didn't know what to do, and my cousin Avraham — the same cousin who played such a big role in my becoming religious — asked my husband and I if we wanted him to go to the Rebbe for a blessing. At first we demurred, because although we kept Shabbat and were Torah-observant Jews, asking for blessings from Rebbes was not really "our thing."

But then my son's condition worsened — his lung collapsed. I recall that it was on the night following Shabbat in February of 1991 that I asked my cousin to please go to the Rebbe the next day and ask him for a blessing for my son.

Of course Avraham went. It was a Sunday, when the Rebbe was handing out dollars for charity, and he waited in line for a long time to ask for a blessing. When he did, giving our names and our son's name, the Rebbe said, "Their mezuzahs are good. But they should check the boy's father's *tefillin*. And they should also change doctors."

When we heard this, we didn't question how the Rebbe could possibly know. But we did what he said. My husband immediately took his *tefillin* to be checked, which turned out not to be kosher. He got another pair right away, of course. Before that day he had not been consistent in putting them on every morning, but now he committed to doing so, and he has done it ever since.

The next day we took our son to a different doctor, who said immediately that his condition had been misdiagnosed. He ordered a new course of treatment, and my son started getting better. I took a long time but he recovered, and today he is married, the father of three sons, and living in Eretz Yisrael.

He was a little boy when the Rebbe's advice changed the course of his health, and of course he has never forgotten it. This experience has had a very big influence on his life. And to this day, he takes his sons to the Convention Center in Jerusalem when Chabad celebrates *Yud Tes Kislev*, what is known as "the New Year of Chasidism." They sing the Rebbe's melodies there, and the kids come home singing them.

So, from one generation to the next, although we are not strictly a Chabad family, the Rebbe's influence continues in our lives.

Mrs. Paula Burg made Aliyah in 2005 and now lives with her family in Beit Shemesh, Israel, where she was interviewed in March of 2016

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

This week in....

- > **5729-1969**, the Rebbe spoke about the recent landing of the first man on the moon. Addressing the watershed moment in history, the Rebbe derived a number of lessons from the historical event in regards to a Jew's commitment to Torah and *mitzvot*.¹ 3 Av
- > **5735-1975**, the Rebbe exhorted the *chasidim* to add in prayer, Torah-study, and charity during the "Nine Days" leading up to the fast on the 9th of Av. The Rebbe also encouraged the practice of holding a *siyum* (celebration marking the completion of a tractate of Talmud) on each of the Nine Days. The joy of celebrating Torah-study would minimize the sadness of this catastrophic period in Jewish history.² 29 Tammuz

¹ *Sichas kodesh* 5729, Vol 2, Page 341

² *Sichas Kodesh*, 5735, Page 344

לעילוי נשמת

יענטא בת שמואל (מינקאוויטש) לייט

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