

HERE'S my STORY

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FOCUS ON THE GOOD

MR. LOUIS GAVIN



My history with Chabad goes back to the mid-1970s, when the Rebbe's emissaries — Rabbi Mendel Lipskar, Rabbi Shalom Ber Groner and Rabbi Yossi Goldman — first came to Yeoville, a suburb of Johannesburg, South Africa, where I was born and raised.

I was part of the post-hippie generation trying to find spiritual answers. This search drew us to Chabad where we found Chasidism and rediscovered the depth and beauty of Judaism.

Although I counted myself part of the Chabad community back from that time, I did not get to meet the Rebbe until nearly ten years later — when I was already married, and my wife was having problems conceiving.

In 1983 I joined a special raffle being held to select a representative of the community to travel to the Rebbe. I won, and I travelled to New York for Passover, where we were hosted by Rabbi Goldman's parents. I finally met the Rebbe in person during *kos shel bracha*, when the Rebbe would distribute wine from his cup immediately after the holiday. When I told him that I was from South Africa, he gave me a huge smile, handed me a small bottle of vodka,

and said, "My views about South Africa are well known. You should go back and celebrate, and remind everyone that I said it will all be good."

The Rebbe was referring to his previous pronouncement that the change over from the apartheid government would be peaceful and that the Jews of South Africa had nothing to fear.

The next day, there was a group audience for about thirty people and we had been advised to wait until everyone had left the room, and then to go up to the Rebbe and request a personal blessing. So we did exactly that.

My wife Maureen spoke. She introduced herself and said, "I've written to the Rebbe a few times that I cannot have children. The prognosis from doctors is very bad — they all say that it is hopeless. Yet I'm asking the Rebbe for a blessing for children."

The Rebbe looked at her for a long time. From the videos of the Rebbe that I have seen, I know that his habit was to respond quickly, but this time he didn't. He must have stared at Maureen for at least 20 seconds, paying no attention to me.

The Rebbe's secretary, Rabbi Leibel Groner, seemed to sense that something was wrong because he started to pull my wife away. He actually grabbed onto her coat and was urging her to move. That's when the Rebbe said, "*Gam zu l'tovah*" — a phrase from the Talmud which translates to "This, too, is for the good."

With that we left but my wife, who is fluent in Hebrew, was very upset. It took me about two hours to console her. I kept saying, "You got a blessing from the Rebbe," but she kept saying, "When I told the Rebbe I couldn't have children, he said to me 'this, too, is for the good'."

It was a statement that could be interpreted in two different ways — that good would eventually come from this situation and she would become pregnant, or that her inability to get pregnant was from G-d and therefore it must be seen as a good thing.

Soon, the Rebbe's meaning became clear.

continued on reverse

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

continued from reverse

When we returned to South Africa — it couldn't have been more than two or three weeks later — we were contacted by a social worker concerning an adoption. We were told: "A Jewish mother is expecting and cannot keep the child, so we are looking for Jewish parents. Would you be interested?"

Needless to say, the Rebbe's words suddenly became obvious, and we immediately agreed to the adoption. A baby boy was born a few months later, our adoption went through, and it was indeed a tremendous blessing.

A year later, we received another call from the same social worker. Again, there was a Jewish mother and baby on the way in need of a home — would we be interested in adopting? Of course, we agreed immediately again, and ended up adopting another baby boy.

Another year went by, and the same thing happened for the third time in a row. This time, we adopted a baby girl.

Over the years, as our children grew up, the Rebbe's blessing has remained with us and, at each milestone; we could happily say *Gam zu l'tovah* — this, too, is for the good, whether at a Bar Mitzvah, when my oldest recited an entire discourse by heart in Yiddish, or at our children's weddings. On so many happy occasions, I have told this story, which usually brings tears to the eyes of everyone in the crowd.

There is one more story about the Rebbe that I would like to share — this story is about his behind-the-scenes influence on South Africa, which has been well documented.

In 1990, I was contacted by Nelson Mandela's organization, the African National Congress (ANC), which was looking for an advertising agency to help reposition the organization from being a liberation movement towards being a political party. Furthermore, they then wanted to hire us as their ad agency for the upcoming general election, the first democratic elections held in South Africa. It was a difficult decision for me because although I was left-leaning and had been brought up in a vehemently anti-apartheid family, it was a challenging situation since many senior members of the ANC were still 'banned' under South African law.

The first time I went to the ANC's Department of Publicity offices, I literally came face-to-face with a massive poster of Yasser Arafat, which covered the wall facing the entrance. This immediately made me question the wisdom of what I was doing, so I decided to ask the Rebbe's advice. I was able to do so with the help of Rabbi Levi Wineberg of the Torah Academy, whose father, Rabbi Yosef Wineberg, lived in New York. Rabbi Wineberg immediately went to inform

the Rebbe that I had been working with the ANC and stressed that their connections to the PLO were making me question my decision.

The Rebbe didn't hesitate to give me a blessing for success and advised that I should use my influence "to focus on the good." There was a condition, however — that I should keep silent and say nothing about his blessing until after the elections.

I had many opportunities to convince the ANC publicity team to eschew all negative messaging and to focus on building a vision of hope, a vision of a better future, for all the people of South Africa.

At the time there were members of the ANC leaders who were inclined otherwise. I remember a specific ad they had suggested. It read, "They stole your dignity, they stole your land, now they want to steal your vote."

Bearing the Rebbe's advice in mind, I was able to convince the decision-makers at the ANC that we should not be wasting our resources looking back at past wrongs, but forward to a better future. Without much further debate, the ad was rejected as a bad idea.

For the next four years I went into every meeting with a clear and powerful conviction of how to approach the campaign — "to focus on the good."

Mr. Louis Gavin is partner and Chief Creative Officer at The Open Collaboration, a company based in Benmore, South Africa. He was interviewed in August of 2014.

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

This week in....

- > **5737 - 1977**, Mr. Abraham Beame, Mayor of New York City, visited 770 to have a private audience with the Rebbe. 23 Av
- > **5751 - 1991**, the Rebbe spoke about the recent milestone achieved with the publishing of the Tanya in braille. The Rebbe explained an entirely new level was reached in spreading the wellsprings of Chassidism, for it to be accessible even to the visually impaired.¹ 23 Av

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