

HERE'S my STORY

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THE MEETING THAT LASTED 45 YEARS

MR. AVRAHAM INFELD

I grew up in South Africa in a family that was focused on Jewish education. In fact, although they were not religious, my parents were influential in establishing the first Jewish day school in South Africa where I was educated.

In 1959, shortly after graduating high school, I made *aliyah* to Israel. There I studied law and also started keeping Shabbat and observing Torah. Eventually, I went to work for the Jewish Agency and was sent as its emissary to the United States.

While in the United States — I was posted to the Baltimore office — I was asked one day in 1969 to accompany a person of great distinction who was visiting from Israel to his meeting with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. I myself had never met the Rebbe although, of course, I knew about him — one can't grow up Jewish without having heard of Chabad or the Rebbe.

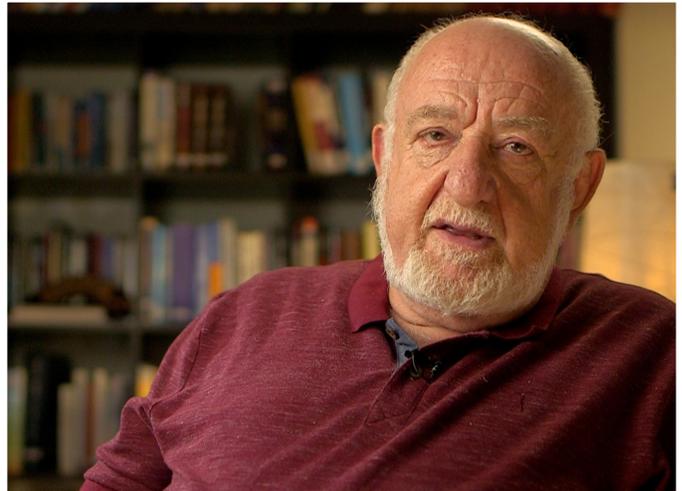
The very important visitor from Israel — whom I am not at liberty to name — was not Torah-observant, but he wanted to behave in a correct manner when meeting the Rebbe, and this was the reason my assistance was requested.

We arrived at Chabad Headquarters in Crown Heights, where the gentleman from Israel was welcomed with great respect and taken to see the Rebbe while I waited outside. After about a half-hour, he came out and said that the Rebbe wanted to speak with me. I said, "You must be mistaken. There is no reason why the Rebbe would want to speak with me." But he insisted that I go in.

Before I tell of what took place when I went into the Rebbe's office, I have to mention that shortly before these events, I had decided to leave the field of Jewish education and had accepted a position to run a new start-up business in Israel.

This is why I was so astonished by what happened next.

I walked into the room, and the Rebbe was standing there. I knew I was standing in the presence of greatness. It is



hard for me to describe the emotional feeling of coming face-to-face with the Rebbe — I can only say that it was a rare moment in my life. I felt the Rebbe's presence fill the entire room, and I felt the love in his eyes. He took my hand, held it in both of his hands and said to me in Yiddish, "Avraham, bleibt in chinuch — Avraham, stay in education."

How he could have known that earlier that week I had signed a contract to leave education, I have absolutely no idea. But the way he urged me to stay, with such warmth, touched me deeply and affected me profoundly.

The distinguished visitor was also affected. Afterwards he said to me several times, "Yesh poh mashehu meyuchad — There is something special here." I have say that, knowing this individual, it was unusual for him to make a statement like this.

When I went home, I cancelled that contract. My wife will testify that for the next two or three months I walked around as if on a cloud. The meeting with the Rebbe had such an incredible impact upon me, even though it lasted

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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@jemedial.org

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only a few minutes.

Of course, I sent the Rebbe a note of thanks, telling him that I decided to follow his advice, and I received a reply from his secretary that the Rebbe sends me his blessing.

The end result was that I dedicated myself to Jewish education for the next forty-five years. I returned to Israel, where I built an institution called the Melitz Center for Jewish Zionist Education, working with tens of thousands of young Israelis and doing educational work with the Israeli Army. And eventually, in May of 2003, I became the international head of Hillel, the world's largest Jewish college campus organization.

When I returned to the United States to work with Hillel, I had some Hillel leaders come to me and complain that Chabad is competing with us on campus. But I could not understand how anybody could possibly relate to Chabad as competition. After all, were it not for the Rebbe of Chabad, I wouldn't be in education, and I wouldn't be the president of Hillel.

But much more than that, I felt strongly that anybody who is in Jewish education has to see Chabad as a partner. Even when people disagree with some of Chabad's underlying principles, they can't possibly disagree with that very sincere love for every Jew that is an inherent part of Chabad. So, I think that, perhaps, my task at Hillel was to try to change the relationship between Hillel and Chabad, and I think I succeeded. I demonstrated that if any problem arises it can be solved because when there is a *desire* to work together, we *can* work together.

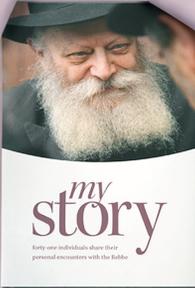
This was the result of the few minutes that I spent with the Rebbe — the few minutes in which I confronted greatness, was met with love and warmth, and in which the course of my life was completely changed. For this I will be forever grateful.

I would just like to add that, in my view, the Rebbe was unique among Jewish leaders. He built a movement based on *chessed*, on loving kindness — a movement that is slowly but surely changing the Jewish world. The Jews are a people who have a covenant with God, and the Rebbe conveyed to his followers that their love for this people must be unlimited.

At Hillel, we would spend hours upon hours training people how to work with students on campus, but nothing can compare with the effect of a Chabad rabbi and his wife opening up their home to students and welcoming

them with genuine love and warmth. That doesn't come from training. That doesn't come from being taught how to do it. It has to be implanted in the heart and soul. And this is what the Rebbe did.

Mr. Avraham Infeld is the founder of Melitz, one of the early architects of Birthright Israel, and past chairman of Israel Forum and Areivim. From 2003 to 2005, he served as the president of Hillel International. He was interviewed in September of 2014.



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This week in...

- > **5717-1956**, at a public address, the Rebbe instructed that *farbrengens* be held in neighborhoods around New York City during the intermediate days of Sukkot, explaining that this would spread the holiday joy.¹ 18 Tishrei
- > **5741-1980**, the Rebbe founded the Tzivot Hashem ("Army of Hashem") children's organization. The Rebbe explained the many lessons in the service of G-d that can be learned from an army.² 19 Tishrei

1. *Torat Menachem* vol. 18 page 72 2. *Sichot Kodesh* 5741 vol. 1 page 177

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