

HERE'S my STORY

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THE DOWN TO EARTH BLESSING

RABBI ELCHONON LISBON



I was born and raised in Worcester, Massachusetts, where I attended the local Chabad day school and, therefore, I got a good grounding in Chassidic teachings as a child.

When I reached Bar Mitzvah age, one of my teachers, Rabbi Velvel Konikov, took me to see the Rebbe, and it was an experience I will never forget. I remember the Rebbe asking me if I received his letter of blessings for the occasion. I replied that I hadn't. He immediately made a note to make sure that it should be sent out a second time, and then he gave me a most beautiful blessing.

When I returned to Worcester, I resolved to be a *chasid* of the Rebbe. This was in 1967, at the time of the Six Day War, just after the Rebbe had launched his *tefillin* campaign urging every Jew to put on *tefillin* in order to win added merit for the security of Israel.

It was not an easy thing to do — to go out in the street, walk up to total strangers and ask them to put on *tefillin*. But the Rebbe said to do it, so I did.

The day after I did it, Rabbi Hershel Fogelman, the dean of my school, called me in and asked, "Did you go out on the *tefillin* campaign yesterday?" I said that I did, and I told him where I had gone — a suburban neighborhood where I knocked on many doors.

"Do you know whose house you went to?!" he responded. "The Mayor of Worcester! And he was so excited that you gave him a chance to put on *tefillin*."

As the Rebbe directed, I stayed in Worcester until the 11th grade, and then I joined my brother at the Chabad *yeshivah* in Montreal.

But then a problem arose. While our father was happy that my brother and I were so strongly connected to *Yiddishkeit*, he felt that he wanted us to make something more of ourselves and, to do that, we had to attend university. Although we wanted to stay in *yeshivah*, our father was adamant that the time had come for us to leave. His initial consent that we go to *yeshivah* in the first place had been quite reluctant, and he was not happy that we were still there. He had a strong resentment brewing inside him, and he decided to go see the Rebbe about it. He knew that the Rebbe had attended university, and he was sure that he could convince the Rebbe to tell us to go university as well.

When I heard that he was going to see the Rebbe, I immediately felt anxious. My father had very strong opinions about our education, and I wasn't sure that he would be able to contain himself in the presence of the Rebbe. I feared that perhaps he'd express himself in an inappropriate way.

I needn't have worried. They had a wonderful conversation, lasting about twenty minutes, which totally disarmed my father.

As my father later told me, when he walked in, the Rebbe greeted him warmly, and my father had to respond in kind. But, of course, he made his position known — he argued that his sons do not have to learn in *yeshivah* all day to be Torah observant Jews. He gave the example of our older brother who went to university and became

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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 1,400 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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a public-school teacher while maintaining a religious lifestyle. This is what he also wanted for his younger children. "But if they continue in *yeshivah*, how will they ever make a living?" he asked.

In response, the Rebbe — with a big, radiant smile on his face — raised his hand upwards and said, "The One Above will send it down from heaven." And then he moved his hand slowly in a downward motion. My father understood that gesture as bringing down G-d's blessing.

The Rebbe went on to tell my father that he shouldn't worry because G-d looks after us. Different people have different missions in this world, but G-d has enough treasures to sustain us all, whatever our life's calling.

Surprisingly, my father accepted that. In later years, when he would repeat that story to me, a special smile would appear on his face as he remembered the moment the Rebbe nullified all the arguments which he had been prepared to take to the nth degree. He enjoyed recapturing the moment of the Rebbe bringing down G-d's blessing for us.

Due to the unusual length of the meeting, the Rebbe's secretary, Rabbi Groner, came in to the room to see what was taking so long. When he entered for the third time, the Rebbe lifted himself from his chair and instructed him to close the door. The fact that the Rebbe refused to cut the meeting short touched my father greatly.

During the time they spent together, the Rebbe was able — through love — to bring him to a new place. He totally mellowed, his entire disposition changed, and he no longer objected to us staying in *yeshivah*.

Over the years, I had many audiences with the Rebbe. And although they were not as long or transformative as the one my father had experienced, they were special moments for me.

During one — and I don't recall exactly when this was — I asked the Rebbe for a blessing to pray properly. I felt that I might be not be pronouncing all the words correctly and this concern led me to request a blessing for more accurate recitation of prayers.

In response, the Rebbe said something very interesting to me. "When you pray, you should pray carefully, using the *siddur*, prayer book, even if for a little while."

This seemed like a strange instruction to me - why "for a little while"? The Rebbe himself *always* used a *siddur*, even when saying a short blessing after eating cake. But

later, when I worked as the head counselor in a day camp, I realized what the Rebbe meant. At that time, I couldn't pray from the *siddur* because I was leading prayers for a couple hundred children and I had to be looking around, making sure that no one was lost. Then I remembered that the Rebbe told me to use the *siddur* — "even if for a little while" — because there would come a time when I wouldn't be able to look into the *siddur* much, so I should do it whenever I had a chance.

So many things I learned from the Rebbe — for example, how to deal with all the distractions and questions that enter one's mind due to one's evil inclination and secular surroundings. He said that the best thing to do is to ignore such distractions and think about something else. "Don't let these things confuse your mind," he said. "Instead, try to think of a Torah subject, for a little bit of light dispels a lot of darkness."

At the end of each audience, the Rebbe would look at me for just a second. And that look is something I can never forget. It was the Rebbe saying, "I told you what you have to do, now go do it." That look was a marching order. It said, "You are my *chasid*, I am your Rebbe, and I need you to do this."

Since 1982, Rabbi Elchonon Lisbon has served as the spiritual leader of Chabad House of Park Heights, Baltimore. He was interviewed in June 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....

> **5735-1974**, The Rebbe wrote a letter to Rabbi Shalom Mashash, who had informed him that he wanted to leave his rabbinical post in Casablanca, Morocco to move to Israel, about the great impact that he was having on the Jewish community in Morocco and the neighboring countries. The Rebbe encouraged him to stay with his community and to continue the good work that he was doing there.¹ 12 *Cheshvan*

1. *Igrot Kodesh* vol. 30 page 16

לע"נ
ר' רפאל משה
בן ר' יעקב מנחם מענדל הכהן

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