

HERE'S my STORY

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YIDDISHKEIT IS NOT DIFFICULT

DR. NAFTALI (TALI) LOEWENTHAL



finish your doctorate."

"But there is so much 'apikorsut' (heresy) that I have to read and write about," I protested.

At that the Rebbe said, "You should write all the footnotes you need. And then," he added with a big smile, "you should do *Teshuvah*."

The Rebbe also warned me not to get involved in comparative religion. He said that Jewish thought or Chassidic thought should not be compared with any other philosophy. And later I realized the wisdom of that.

The entire audience lasted nine minutes, but it was very special. Indeed, it was a climactic moment in my life. I felt that the Rebbe revealed to me parts of myself that I did not know about. And that this meeting was like a detonator which set off a powerful explosion within my inner self.

I followed the Rebbe's advice. I continued with my Ph.D. studies on a part-time basis, because the rest of the time I was teaching at the Lubavitch Senior Girls School and also was becoming increasingly involved in Lubavitch's outreach work, both of which I continue to this day.

As time went on, I decided to change the topic of my Ph.D. dissertation. Initially, I had wanted to write about the Kotzker Rebbe, but I could not find enough source material. Since I was getting more involved in Chabad thought at the time, I got the idea of writing about Chabad teachings. When I asked the Rebbe about this, his response was "It's very good that you want to write about Chabad ... such as about the Mittlerer Rebbe," referring to the second Rebbe of Chabad.

I took the hint, but I was worried that I would not get approval from my thesis supervisor at the university, Professor Chimen Abramsky.

Indeed, when I came back to London and called him, telling him that I wanted to change my thesis topic, he predictably replied, "No, Loewenthal, I don't agree with that course of action. No, I would not support that at all."

But then I floated the Rebbe's suggestion, "What about the Mittlerer Rebbe?"

His response was immediate and enthusiastic: "Excellent
continued on reverse

Although I received a religious education as a child, I pursued secular studies in university, and it was not until I got married that I became seriously interested in Judaism. After a time, my wife and I moved to Stamford Hill, which is the Chassidic neighborhood of London, even though we were not Chassidic then. In fact, both of us were involved in academia — she as a lecturer in psychology, and I as a Ph.D. candidate in Jewish history and Hebrew literature.

Then, in 1968, while at University College London, I became acquainted with Rabbi Shmuel Lew, the emissary of the Lubavitcher Rebbe who had just been appointed student counselor. He found me a study partner for my Talmudic studies, and he introduced me to Chassidic teachings.

The first time I met the Rebbe was in 1973, when I came to spend a month in New York. I had written a long letter to the Rebbe in which I asked his advice regarding my future: Should I continue with my studies at University College and finish my doctorate? Or, should I transfer to Jews College (now London School of Jewish Studies) and get rabbinic ordination? Or, should I go into business?

When the Rebbe read my letter, he answered: "You should

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idea! You could write about *Shaar HaYichud* or *Shaarei Ora*” And that’s what I did, though it took me a long time, because I managed to do only a little bit each year while teaching at the Lubavitch school and working in campus outreach.

The next time I came to see the Rebbe — this was in 1979 — I handed him the chapter that I had just completed, and he asked me, “How many chapters does this thesis have?”

“Eight,” I replied.

“And what chapter is this?”

“This is chapter two.”

The Rebbe looked at me and said something like, “Nu, get on with it. Get it done!”

And it was as if he lit a fire under me. Suddenly, I had a burning need to finish it. I had begun in 1972 and, by 1979, I had completed two chapters, but it took me only three years to finish the remaining six chapters.

Once I completed the thesis — which was entitled “The Concept of *Mesiras Nefesh*, Self-Sacrifice, in the Teachings of Rabbi Dov Ber, the Mittlerer Rebbe” — I thought to have it published as a book. And so, I asked the Rebbe whether I should try the religious publisher Feldheim, or perhaps the Kehot Publication Society which specialized in Lubavitch topics, or if I should try an academic publisher. The Rebbe replied, “It should be the most famous academic publisher.”

I checked around and was advised that the University of Chicago Press was the top academic press. But before I had a chance to approach them, they contacted me. They said that they heard I was writing a book based on my thesis and they were interested. Just like that, out of the blue. I assume that they were interested in publishing books on Jewish topics and so had checked with someone at University College, who mentioned me as having a recent doctorate in this field. But the coincidence was just amazing. And the book was published.

I would just like to add that my wife’s life was impacted by the Rebbe no less than my own. Early on, she also came to seek the Rebbe’s advice. Living where we did, in Stamford Hill, my wife felt the pressure to give up her job as a university lecturer in psychology and, instead, to stay at home with the children as the other Chassidic women did. She was also concerned that perhaps psychology was not an acceptable pursuit for a religious woman.

But the Rebbe said to her, “There is no conflict between psychology and Torah ... You should use psychology to have a positive effect on your students.”

She replied, “But I have no Jewish students at this time.”

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17 Cheshvan

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But the Rebbe simply said, “Even so.”

So, she understood that she should keep on doing what she was doing, and that it was the right thing for her to do. And later, she did encounter quite a number of Jewish students and academics and did have a major influence on them.

Years after, when I was visiting the Rebbe while he was giving out dollars for charity, the Rebbe began speaking about my wife, who was by then the mother of eleven children and a full professor (what in England is known as a “chair” of the psychology department). He said, “Your wife is a religious woman, who covers her hair, who teaches in the academic world. She is showing everyone that *Yiddishkeit* is not difficult. Not difficult! Not difficult!” He said it just like that, repeating “not difficult” three times, in an intense way.

I came away from that visit with the Rebbe very inspired. I have shared with many others those words of the Rebbe, telling them: “You might think being Torah observant is a challenge, but it is not difficult — it is a positive thing, and however much of a challenge it might seem, it’s really an opportunity. That is the beautiful Chabad perspective on life.”

Dr. Naftali (Tali) Loewenthal presently directs the Chabad Research Unit, while lecturing at the University College on the subject of Jewish spirituality. He resides in London and was interviewed in December of 2010.

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

This week in....

> **5748-1987**, In honor of the fifth Chabad Rebbe, the Rebbe Rashab’s, 127th birthday, the Rebbe handed out a Chassidic discourse, titled *Heichaltzu*, recited by the Rebbe Rashab on the topic of loving a fellow Jew. The Rebbe said that boys from the age of twelve and girls from the age of eleven should come to receive the booklet from him. This was the first of many pamphlets that the Rebbe would distribute by hand to the public over the course of the coming years. 20 *Cheshvan*

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