

HERE'S my STORY

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THE RELUCTANT PHILOSOPHER

DR. YITZCHOK BLOCK

I grew up in Nashville, Tennessee, in the middle of the Great Depression, in a Jewish environment that was predominantly Reform. But, when my father passed away in 1943, right after my Bar Mitzvah, I began to attend the local Orthodox synagogue in order to say *Kaddish* for him. Then, after the year of mourning ended, I continued to participate in the *minyan*. As well, I started keeping Shabbat — which was a challenge when I had to miss playing with my team in a basketball tournament, but I persevered.

In 1949, Rabbi Zalman Posner, a Chabad emissary, came to town and ignited within me an interest to seriously study Torah texts. At that time I was attending Vanderbilt University, where I was also seriously studying philosophy.

And that is where my story begins.

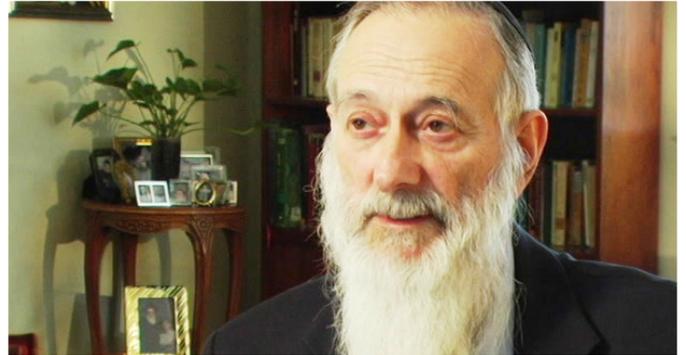
Through the intercession of my mentor at Vanderbilt, Professor Arthur Smallion, I was accepted to Harvard University for graduate studies in philosophy. But I wasn't sure that I should go there — a university in Edinburgh, Scotland, had also accepted me and that exotic location appealed more to me. Meanwhile, I decided to spend my summer vacation of 1952 at the Chabad *yeshivah* in New York.

While there, I had my first audience with the Rebbe.

I remember talking with him about Plato, whose philosophy was a major interest of mine at the time. But the Rebbe called him "Platon" which is the way Greek scholars refer to him, and it struck me that the Rebbe must have a deep knowledge of the subject.

He went on to say that the philosophy of Plato was very cruel. I had never heard anybody say that about Plato before and I was shocked. I assumed that he was referring to Plato's belief that you had to take children away from their parents and train them to be subservient to the state which, I had to admit is cruel. Later I abandoned the study of Plato and become a student of Aristotle instead.

At the end of the summer at the Chabad *yeshivah*, it was time to leave. But where should I go from here? I wrote to



the Rebbe asking if I should go to Harvard or Edinburgh. The Rebbe responded that it should be Harvard, and he underlined the word for emphasis. So that is what I did.

Learning at Harvard was difficult. I went in thinking I knew philosophy, but I immediately saw that I didn't know anything. At Harvard there were graduate students who knew more than my professors at Vanderbilt, and this is no exaggeration. I was studying ten hours a day, and I was feeling totally out of their league.

I began to yearn to return to *yeshivah*, and one day I got on the bus and returned to Chabad Headquarters. My *yeshivah* buddies were all very happy to see me, and I felt great about it. That is, until I saw the Rebbe.

I told him, "I've decided to return to *yeshivah*."

He responded, "I think you will come to regret that you gave up your profession."

He must have seen the fallen expression on my face, because he smiled and said, "You have to have courage."

I walked out stunned, but I got back on the bus and returned to Harvard. It was very hard, I was depressed at times, but I got a Master's Degree, although I failed the exams for a Ph.D.

I wrote to the Rebbe, again telling him that I wanted to

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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. While we have done our utmost to authenticate these stories, they reflect the listener's recollection and interpretation of the Rebbe's words. Please share any corrections, comments and suggestions. mystory@jemedial.org

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return to *yeshivah* because I failed my exams, but the Rebbe would not agree to that. He responded, "Take them again. You are smart, and there is no reason you shouldn't pass." And sure enough, I passed the second time and went on to write my dissertation on Aristotle. But this too was difficult for me and I might not have finished it were it not for the Rebbe nudging me all the while, "Finish ... finish your dissertation."

So, finally, I did — in 1958. It was called "Aristotle's Theory of Perception," and it proved quite an original dissertation in many ways. In fact, it was so original that it went against the accepted thinking of Aristotelian philosophers of the day and no academic journal would publish it. I confided my problem to the Rebbe who made a novel suggestion: "Ask one of your Harvard professors to intervene."

I would never have thought to do that in my wildest imagination, because I knew that I had written a controversial dissertation and it was absurd to think that any professor would stick his neck out for me. But because the Rebbe advised it, I asked. As a result, my article was published in the *Journal of Greek Theology*, and it got a lot of attention. Indeed, I became famous because of it and I was able to publish many more papers. This was all because of the Rebbe's foresight. I was a nobody, and the Rebbe turned me into a well-respected scholar. But it was not until later that I found out why he did it.

Having finished my Ph.D. I returned to *yeshivah* with the aim of receiving rabbinic ordination. The Rebbe allowed me to stay for a time, but he didn't let me get my rabbinic ordination. When I told him of my plan, he responded, "*Lo mit an aleph!* — Under no circumstances whatsoever!" He did not want me to have the title "Rabbi," he wanted me to have the title "Professor."

I only began to grasp his reasoning when I started teaching. When my students saw me wearing a *yarmulke*, many of them came to me to discuss doubts about religion that were troubling them. I was the right address for their questions of faith because I had obtained a Ph.D. from Harvard, yet I had remained Torah observant.

And now I finally understood what the Rebbe knew all along — that with my degree and my reputation as an Aristotelian scholar, I was in a position to have a major influence on other Jews. In fact, I didn't even have to open my mouth — just being who I was, a respected philosopher who was religious, spoke volumes.

The Rebbe knew that this was how it would be. He wanted me to become as important in the world of philosophy as I could possibly become because the more important

I was, the more influence I could have on my students. That's what he had in mind all along. And that is why he constantly encouraged me to give papers in philosophy, to attend conferences and to give guest lectures. Without his prodding, I would not have done it, so it is clear to me that he is entirely responsible for my career.

From the very moment that I stepped foot in Lubavitch, the Rebbe was working overtime that I should not become a rabbi, that I should become a famous professor. And he pulled it off against my will, so to speak. How he did it, I am not sure. But here I stand as proof. And, because he pulled it off, hundreds of people who have looked to me as a model are Torah-observant today — some fully, and some in some level of observance. Just as the Rebbe envisioned.

Dr. Yitzchok Block (1930-2017) was a professor of philosophy and Chabad campus emissary at the University of Western Ontario, in London, Canada. He was interviewed in February of 2008.

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

This week in....

- > **5716-1955**, in a letter addressed to the annual dinner of Lubavitch Yeshivas, the Rebbe compared the efforts to create pure and holy educational institutions to the struggle of the Jews in the time of the Chanukah story to restore the purity of the Holy Temple. ¹ 29 Kislev
- > **5722-1961**, the Rebbe related that when the Previous Rebbe got married, his parents built an additional room in their house for the newlyweds. Before the couple moved into the room, children were brought to study Torah there. The lesson is that before erecting a new home, consideration should be given to the spiritual atmosphere that will be present therein. ² 2 Tevet
- > **5747-1986**, the Rebbe addressed children, entrusting them with the special mission of asking for their parents' help to make their bedrooms into a place of Torah, prayer and charity. ³ 28 Kislev

1. Sefer Hasichot 5747 vol. 1 page 177 2. Igrot Kodesh vol. 12 page 182
3. Torat Menachem 5722 vol. 1 page 349

In honor of our dear Rebbe

By Rabbi **Berry** and **Shayna Nash**
and Rabbi **Peretz** & **Michal Shapiro**

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