An inspiring story for your Shabbos table

HERE'S *my* STORY

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ב"ה
ערב שבת פרשת בא, ג' שבט, תשע"ח
Erev Shabbat Parshat Bo, January 19, 2018

THE BLACK BELT WITH THE BLACK HAT

RABBI FISHEL JACOBS

I was born Philip Jacobs, although I was better known as "Flip Jacobs" in the predominantly Jewish Brooklyn neighborhood where I grew up. But in 1967 — when I was 11 — we moved to South Royalton, Vermont, a hamlet with a population of only 900, where we were the only Jews in town. There was an undercurrent of anti-Semitism brewing there, and I got a bitter taste of it when I started school.

The school administration could not prevent the beatings I was routinely subjected to on and off school property, and it became painfully clear that I had to learn to defend myself. So my parents signed me up for karate classes with a South Korean master. From the beginning, I trained intensely — five hours a day, every day of the week. I got my black belt at age 18, and won many regional tournaments including the 1976 YMCA East Coast Black Belt Heavy Weight title. I spent my high school and college years training and competing in karate with the plan to eventually fight in the Olympics.

While I was attending the University of Vermont, I met Rabbi Shmuel Hecht, the Chabad emissary there, who immediately invited me to his house for Shabbat dinner and repeated that invitation every week. He called me Fishel, which nobody called me before. He would say, "Fishel, the Rebbetzin made great food for you, she made chicken wings for you..." How could I refuse? After a while, he also invited me to the synagogue on Saturday morning. So I started going there as well.

I graduated college in 1979 when, with Rabbi Hecht's encouragement, I enrolled in the Hadar HaTorah *yeshivah* in Crown Heights. Of course, being so close to Chabad Headquarters, I saw the Rebbe every day when he came to pray *Minchah*. And I made of point of standing near him. I recall the Rebbe looking at me — straight into my eyes — and I believe that he must have been reading my soul.

But, the bustling Chabad Headquarters was not the best place for me to submerge into my studies. With the

Rebbe's approval, I transferred to the *yeshivah* in Kfar Chabad, Israel. There it was also not easy for me. I didn't know Hebrew or Aramaic, the language of the Talmud. Basically, I didn't know anything.

I had begun a new life, far away, and alone. And for the first eighteen months I suffered horribly, both emotionally and physically. This was because I was undergoing training withdrawal. When one gets used to so much physical exertion, one becomes addicted to it. I needed to train every single day for three to four hours, but I couldn't, because of the *yeshivah* schedule. I became extremely restless and wasn't absorbing anything from my studies.

Rabbi Moshe Naparstek, my spiritual mentor at the *yeshivah*, saw the problem, and he suggested that I start learning the Alter Rebbe's Tanya by heart. "Engrave the holy letters inside yourself," he said. That very night, I began dedicating four hours daily, beyond the regular *yeshivah* schedule, to that task. It proved to be a godsend because I channeled my years of karate discipline into learning Tanya verbatim.

But, after three years I had still not progressed significantly in the general study program, and I was twenty-five years old already. At that point — this was

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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@jemedia.org**

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Passover time, 1981 — I came to the United States, and I had an audience with the Rebbe.

I vividly remember that, in his presence, I felt as if the entire world was still. There was no outside world at all. I was removed from all my problems.

I had come with my mom who, like the good Jewish mother she was, wasted no time in bringing up the issue of a marriage match, a *shidduch*, for me. The Rebbe asked what I was doing in this regard. I responded that my rabbis in Kfar Chabad recommended I start looking after Passover. To which the Rebbe responded, "It is now a whole week after Pesach, and you have not yet done anything about it?!"

I replied that I wasn't sure if I should remain in Crown Heights or return to Kfar Chabad, where I was still at the first level in Talmudic studies. "Are you planning on studying for *smichah*?" the Rebbe asked, referring to rabbinic ordination. I explained that my rabbis in Kfar Chabad felt the right time for me to start such a program would be a year after I got married. The Rebbe didn't approve of that. He was of the opinion that I should start right away. Here I was still a beginner, having trouble grasping the basics, yet the Rebbe believed I could become a rabbi!

As far as finding a spouse, he recommended that I return to Israel where my married friends would "find you a proper *shidduch* ... easily, in the natural course of things," as he put it.

When I returned to Kfar Chabad, I told Rabbi Naparstek what happened and immediately began rabbinic studies.

Then, about three weeks later, a married friend unexpectedly came to tell me that he found me a *shidduch*. When I heard that the young woman was a teacher of Torah studies in a seminary in Jerusalem, I immediately said, "The Rebbe said I would find a match in an easy, natural way through my married friends and now it is happening. She's the one." And she was. We have now been married 37 years. Today we have seven children and fourteen grandchildren.

As far as the studies for rabbinic ordination, they proved extraordinarily difficult. It took me two years to become an ordained rabbi. But, in addition to my certification through the Chabad *yeshivah* system, I also wanted the official ordination of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. I wrote to the Rebbe asking for his blessing, which he immediately gave. But, when I took their test six months later, I flunked. I tried a second time and flunked again. After more struggle and review, I requested an oral exam, and Rabbi Dov Lior, the chief rabbi of Hebron, tested me in person. He tested me four times, for three hours each time. On each exam he gave me the highest grades possible.

With the Rebbe's encouragement, I continued studying in a post-graduate *kolel*, where I spent twelve years altogether. During that period, I completed the grueling requirements to teach Talmud in high schools and to become a rabbinic attorney. Then I began publishing practical books on subjects such as the laws of family purity and the laws of Shabbat. Today, these books have been translated into numerous languages and are sold worldwide.

I accomplished what I did in life because of the Rebbe's foresight. When I was struggling at the basic level in my studies, and nobody believed that I'd ever achieve anything academically, he saw my potential. Back then, he was urging me to pursue rabbinic ordination. He saw inside of me what nobody else saw — even I didn't see it. Through his blessings, I have a perfect wife, family, and life. As far I am concerned, I owe him everything.

Rabbi Fishel Jacobs is a speaker, author and the head responder for numerous websites dealing with issues of family purity. He has previously served as an officer in the Israeli army, a rabbi in the prison service, and as the Chabad campus rabbi at Tel Aviv University. He was interviewed in May of 2014.

לחיזוק התקשרות ולהצלחה בשליחותי

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This week in....

> **5744-1984,** the Rebbe held a *farbrengen* celebrating the arrival of Tanyas that were printing in Israel. At the *farbrengen* the Rebbe spoke about the global initiative to print Tanyas wherever Jews live to spread the wellsprings of *chasidut*. The Rebbe directed that the Tanyas be studied from while fresh off the press, and that at least some of the books be kept in the city in which they were printed. [1] *3 Shvat*

1. Torat Menachem 5744 vol. 2 page 834

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