

# HERE'S my STORY

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## CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME

**RABBI SHMUEL GUREWICZ**

When I was ten years old, my family escaped Russia, together with many other Lubavitcher families. This was right after the war in 1946. We made our way, via displaced persons camps in Europe, to Australia. There I studied and also taught in a Chabad *yeshivah* in Melbourne, but all the while I yearned to go and learn overseas.

The idea of going overseas, to some exotic place, really appealed to my young mind. I was sure it would be better than Australia though I realize now that many consider Australia highly exotic. So, I wrote to the Rebbe asking permission to leave, but he didn't answer my letters even though I wrote several times. Then, my mentor, Rabbi Abba Pliskin, agreed to petition the Rebbe on my behalf. The Rebbe's answer to him came immediately, and it was quite lengthy.

In brief, the Rebbe was against my leaving Australia. He explained that there is a *mitzvah* that nobody else can do, of spreading Judaism in Australia, and the proof that this is my *mitzvah* is that nobody else is doing it. He quoted the Alter Rebbe, the founder of Chabad, "If one does charity — material charity and charity in the spiritual sense (meaning giving of his time to teach others), then his mind and heart will become crystallized and refined one-thousand-fold."

"In other words," the Rebbe concluded, "the hour that this boy (meaning me) learns in Melbourne, along with teaching others, will bring him as much success as if he had learned one-thousand hours."

Later on, when I was nineteen, I organized a trip to New York for the High Holidays, so that I could meet the Rebbe. This was a huge undertaking as the cost of such a trip in 1955 was 600 pounds which was equal to a year's wages for a laborer in those days. I managed to save up some money and I raised the rest.

When I met the Rebbe — the night before Rosh Hashanah — I asked if I could stay in New York, but the



Rebbe responded, "You only just arrived. We will discuss it later, when you are ready to return." So it was already clear to me that I would be going back.

Sure enough, at the end of my trip, the Rebbe said I had to go back, and I had to go now, this night. I protested that there were no flights tonight, but the Rebbe declared, "You can go by train."

How does one go from the United States to Australia by train? It turned out that the Rebbe wanted me to go to Montreal by train before returning to Australia by the route that I had previously planned, which included stops in London and Paris. In all these places I was to organize a *farbrengen* and speak words of Torah and explain Chasidic teachings. He also outlined my mission when I returned to Melbourne — I was to establish a number of Chabad groups: Tzeirei Agudas Chabad (the youth organization), Bnos Chabad (the girls' organization), Nshei Chabad (the women's organization), etc.

I set off by train and did what the Rebbe instructed me to do. And when I arrived home I tried to start all of these organizations. But I was a boy of nineteen and, truly, some of this was beyond me. I succeeded with Tzeirei Agudas Chabad and Bnos Chabad, but I was very relieved to learn that the women already had a Nshei

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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@jemedi.org](mailto:mystory@jemedi.org)

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Chabad organization, so I did not have to try to start that one.

In 1960, I got married to an Israeli girl, and four years later moved to Israel with my family, where we lived until 1971.

I came back to Australia because of what happened with my father.

At the Rebbe's directive, my father had abandoned his knitting business and went to work for the Oholei Yosef Yitzchok *yeshiva* in Melbourne as a teacher and fundraiser. But he didn't like it much. When he complained about it, the Rebbe rebuked him, saying that apparently the Chabad people in Australia do not grasp the importance of their work. While in other parts of the world, teaching Chasidism is important, in Australia it is even more so, "like resurrecting the dead." This is why, the Rebbe concluded, "I fought with your son not to leave Australia. And now, if it is something which will cause marital difficulties then don't even mention it, but if it is possible, you should try to bring him back to Australia, even for a fixed period of time."

When I heard this from my father, I accepted an offer to become the principal of Bais Rivkah in Melbourne.

It proved a very interesting and, at times challenging, assignment, but I always had the Rebbe to turn to when I didn't know what to do. I recall one occasion when I asked him about expelling a girl from school. The Rebbe urged me to do everything in my power not to expel her as it is likely that once such a girl leaves school, she will lose her way. But if, despite my best efforts, she is still a bad influence on others, then interests of the majority must take priority over the individual.

On another occasion, I wrote the Rebbe that I noticed a problem in the study program — the girls found it more exciting to learn some of the secular subjects like biology rather than Torah. So I asked the Rebbe if it might be more interesting for them to learn Torah by topics rather than chapter by chapter. The topics I had in mind were faith, self-sacrifice, reward and punishment, trust in G-d, etc. to be taught along with verses from the Torah and other Jewish texts.

The Rebbe approved of the idea of topics as long as it was under the banner of Jewish thought, but was adamantly opposed to teaching the Torah out of order. That's another important piece of advice that the Rebbe

gave me early on in my career as educator.

Initially, I planned to stay in the job for three to four years, as my wife really wanted to return to Israel, but when the Rebbe heard of our plans he wrote to us as follows:

I have no doubt that your mission (and thus your benefit materially and spiritually) is where you are currently, at least for the near future. And this mission was sweetened in a supernatural fashion... The only problem is that you still have your freedom of choice, and you are enticing 'the evil one' that he should take away from your peace of mind with all kinds of ideas which are illogical. I leave the final decision to you.

So, after receiving such a letter, what could we do but stay?

I am glad we stayed. The Rebbe did us a great favor by making us his emissaries, by giving us this opportunity to serve. And because of this, thousands of girls have established Jewish homes and are living lives in accordance with the Torah. We played a part — my wife and I — in their growth and development, and that is enough for us. We wouldn't have had it any other way.

*Before retiring in 2013, Rabbi Shmuel Gurewicz served as the principal of the Beth Rivkah Ladies' College in Melbourne, Australia, for forty-two years. He was interviewed in August 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...

> **5730-1970**, the Rebbe described the importance of sharing Torah messages at the dinners and fundraisers of charitable organizations. He explained that a Torah speech should not merely be a method of motivating the crowd to donate generously, but as an end in itself. This has been the Jewish way going back to the feast of King Achashverosh where the Jews spoke words of Torah while the non-Jewish guests discussed futile matters. <sup>1</sup> 14 Adar

1. *Torat Menachem* vol. 59 page 360

לע"נ  
הילדה חיה שרה רחל בת התמים  
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