

HERE'S my STORY

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NO HALF AND HALF

RABBI MEIR BASTOMSKY

Mine was not an auspicious beginning. I was born in Vilna in the midst of World War Two, just a week before the German bombardment of the city began in 1941. It was difficult to assemble a *minyan* for my circumcision, as everyone was scared to come outdoors and, thereafter, my parents had to hide me in an orphanage while they fled the Nazis.

My father did not survive the war, although my mother and I did. She remarried and my step-father, David Sattler, raised me like a real father, and I always considered him as such. He was a descendent of the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chasidic Movement, but after the war he became a Communist. This mindset also influenced how he directed my education toward secular studies, but, while I responded to his guidance, I also had questions of my own.

After we moved to Haifa, Israel, my parents found it hard to make ends meet. In order to bolster the family finances, I started to tutor younger children. It was then that I had my first major insight. I am naturally sensitive to interpersonal relationships, so I noticed a difference between the children studying in secular schools and those studying in religious schools. The religious ones had an air of calmness, and their relations with their parents were entirely different, much more respectful.

After graduating high school in 1959, I was drafted into the IDF. During my last year in the army, I began to study mechanical engineering at the Technion, Israel's Institute of Technology. Here, too, I noticed a disturbing phenomenon — on the one hand, from the technological point of view, we were the top-level school in the region, yet, on the other hand, when it came to human relations, I felt that we were at the lowest level. I saw how my fellow students spent their free time, and it upset me very much that people who were considered to be at the top intellectually were involved in such low things. As for me, I felt that something was missing, although I didn't know exactly what.

At the Technion, I met a student named Shmuel Katan, who was associated with Chabad, and we developed



a close relationship. This association led me to draw close to several Chabad rabbis, including Rabbi Reuven Dunin, who taught me about the Rebbe and what he represented.

Slowly but surely, I moved toward Torah observance, and by my third year at the Technion, I decided to begin wearing a *yarmulke* — a step that was very difficult for me. My friends immediately began to ask me why I was doing it, and whether someone in my family had died. The problem was, I didn't have enough good answers for all the questions they were asking me.

After completing my studies at the Technion in 1966, I went to learn at the *yeshivah* in Kfar Chabad for a few months. I was at a crossroads and having trouble deciding what I was going to do with myself. My father, who had pushed me to become an engineer, had great hopes for me. He wanted me to become financially successful the way he had never managed. But I wanted to fill the great gap in my Torah knowledge. Meanwhile, Rabbi Dunin, in his great wisdom, was urging me to go to New York and seek advice from the Rebbe.

I made the trip in 1967. No sooner had I arrived at Chabad

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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 1,500 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.



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Headquarters than I enrolled in the *yeshivah* there and immersed myself completely in Torah studies. I learned day and night, very seriously, because I felt that I had to learn a lot of material in a short time. I was twenty-six years old already, and I was missing basic information in many realms.

I studied there for nine months, during which time I had two meetings with the Rebbe. The first was at the beginning, and I met him only for a short while together with a group of other visitors. My second audience with the Rebbe took place later that year, and it would shape my life.

I asked the Rebbe whether I should continue to learn in

the *yeshivah* or go back to Israel. The Rebbe recommended that I return to Israel. That brought up my fear of what would be my father's response to my appearance. I had left Israel with a small French beard and a knitted *yarmulke*, and now I was dressed like a committed *chassid* with a black hat and full beard. I was worried he would react badly and, since he had a heart-

condition, this might have a bad impact on his health. So I asked the Rebbe if I should change my dress or trim my beard a bit.

The Rebbe answered that I should not touch my beard under any circumstances. He gave me a deep and fascinating explanation about beards and their essence. According to Jewish law, as articulated by the third Rebbe of Chabad, the Tzemach Tzedek, a full beard is included in the Torah command "they shall not shave the edges of their beard." According to Kabbalah, the hairs of the beard symbolize an extremely high level of spirituality and are connected to the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.

"Go whole, the way you are," the Rebbe said, "because the minute you begin to be half-and-half, there will be no end; you will be forced to compromise more and more. And regarding your father, with G-d's help, he will have complete health and a long life!"

My father indeed lived until age eighty-two —beyond what would be expected for a person with his health issues —and I believe that this was due to the Rebbe's



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blessing.

I asked the Rebbe about my professional future. His answer was surprising — especially so because I had told him that I had finished training to be a mechanical engineer. He said, "If you don't need money and financial matters are not your main concern, then choose a career in education."

Initially, I was a bit puzzled by his response, but I recalled that, back in high school, Israeli psycho-technic examinations had shown that I was more drawn to humanities studies than to science. This is what the Rebbe also understood about me — that I was more suited for education than engineering.

I learned that for financial gain, a person can work in a profession that does not fit his natural talents and makeup. He might have economic satisfaction, but not emotional satisfaction. Only when a person works in a realm that truly suits him will he feel that he is fulfilling his true mission in this world.

That insight changed my life. The Rebbe revealed to me that my life's mission — and indeed my emotional wholeness — lay in a profession that was more spiritual. How right he was!

Rabbi Meir Bastomsky served as the principal of the vocational school in Kfar Chabad for twenty-three years, and spent almost twenty years as principal and then general director of the Tzemach Tzedek Talmud Torah in Petach Tikva. He was interviewed in his home in Kfar Chabad in December, 2011.

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

This week in....

> **5742 — 1981**, the Rebbe held a *farbrengen* to invigorate the initiative for every Jew to buy a letter in a Torah scroll. Noting that over forty five Torah scrolls would have to be written in order for every single Jew to own a letter, the Rebbe encouraged Jews from all communities to help promote this project. After sharing the number of letters that had been sold by that point, the Rebbe expressed his expectation for a dramatic increase in the future.¹ 10 Cheshvan

1. *Torat Menachem* 5742 vol. 1 page 382

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