

HERE'S
my
STORY

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IT'S NOT ABOUT POLITICS

RABBI AVRAHAM BACKENROTH



During the years that Rabbi Betzalel Zolty served as the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Jerusalem, I headed his office. I joined him on a visit to the United States in December of 1981, when he was honored at a fundraising dinner on behalf of institutions of the Ger *chasidim*.

During that trip, Rabbi Zolty planned to meet a few important rabbis, such as Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the leading *halachic* authority in America, Rabbi Yosef Ber Soloveitchik, the head of the rabbinic school of Yeshiva University, the Klausenberger Rebbe and the Lubavitcher Rebbe. In those years however, it was hard to obtain an appointment with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, as he was no longer meeting people as much as he had in the past, but I managed to arrange it.

When we came into the Rebbe's office, the first thing that struck me was the simplicity of the room. The Rebbe stood up as we entered, walked around his desk and came right up to the door to greet Rabbi Zolty. He shook his hand warmly and invited him to sit down. After the initial greetings, an animated Torah discussion began between the two.

The first topic that Rabbi Zolty brought up was his concern that too few yeshivah graduates were interested in taking up positions in the rabbinate. This matter disturbed him greatly, and he would talk about it wherever he went.

He believed it was important that, when in *yeshivah*, the students should be occupied with learning Jewish law (*halachah*) rather than focusing solely on Talmud, so that they could later qualify for rabbinic positions and lead communities. He was very concerned for the future of the rabbinate, and it was important to him to see Torah scholars filling positions in Israeli cities and settlements.

The Rebbe expressed agreement with Rabbi Zolty and encouraged him very much in his efforts to right this situation. Furthermore, the Rebbe told him that for quite some time he had been sending graduates of Chabad *yeshivahs* to strengthen existing Jewish communities all over the world and to make sure that there were functioning synagogues and Torah classes wherever they went. The Rebbe also promised Rabbi Zolty to try and further the matter in Israel through his channels of influence.

Another topic that came up was the issue of giving up parts of the Land of Israel "for peace." A short while before this, the right-wing government of Prime Minister Menachem Begin returned the Sinai territories to Egypt, and there was a sort of euphoria that peace between Israel and the Arab nations was in the offing if we only gave up enough land. The Rebbe asked Rabbi Zolty to utilize his influence as the chief rabbi of Jerusalem to uproot the very thought of giving up *any* land. Rabbi Zolty had excellent connections with the leaders of the country, including Knesset members, and he was a valued person in the eyes of many, but he claimed that he could do nothing because, due to his position, he wasn't permitted to get involved in political matters.

The Rebbe rejected his argument and emphasized that this is not a political matter but a *halachic* matter. He repeatedly stated throughout the conversation that "*halacha* is the word of G-d," and a fascinating discussion began between these two Torah giants whether the Jewish settlement of the Land of Israel has the qualifications of an individual conquest or national conquest, and whether the Israeli victories in the Six Day War had the same status as King David's victories. I recall that the Rebbe quoted Maimonides in support of his position. I also recall that Rabbi Zolty got excited and turned red, while the Rebbe stayed calm, with both of his hands resting on the table, and each time the argument took another turn, he cited a source to back up his position.

continued on reverse

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.



continued from reverse

During the course of the meeting, a bell rang a few times and, at a certain point, one of the secretaries came in and told the Rebbe that the Knesset member, Rabbi Avraham Yosef Shapira, was waiting outside for a half-hour already, but the Rebbe didn't want to interrupt the discussion, and he continued to try to convince Rabbi Zolty of his view.

In the end, Rabbi Zolty agreed with the Rebbe that this was indeed a *halachic* matter, but he still insisted that it wouldn't be right for rabbis to speak about it. He said he knew that he wouldn't get cooperation from Israel's political leadership and was of the opinion that this is one of the things about which it is written, "Just as it is a *mitzvah* to say things which will be heard, it is also a *mitzvah* not to say that which will not be heard."

Rabbi Zolty worried that the rabbis' involvement in this topic might harm their standing and hurt their level of influence in matters of Torah and Jewish law, especially since their opinions were not likely to be considered. But the Rebbe argued strongly that this was a matter of life and death, and that many lives would ultimately be lost as a result of handing back land.

This flowed into the next topic: whether or not it would be wise for the Rebbe to immigrate to Israel. The Rebbe said that his influence over the wider Jewish world was greater from the United States. He was concerned that, in Israel, he wouldn't be able to express his opinions freely on topics of Torah and Jewish law without entering into confrontations with the political leadership. On the other hand, how could he hold back if he thought it was necessary? For this reason, he thought that his presence in Israel would not be good — neither for the Jews in Israel nor for those in the Diaspora.

The Rebbe clearly cared deeply about Israel and every Jew in it, and I must share an interesting personal anecdote that illustrates this very well.

At one juncture in the meeting, the Rebbe asked me where I lived and where my parents lived. When I mentioned that my parents lived in Ramat Gan, the Rebbe asked where my father prayed on Shabbat. I answered that he prayed in the synagogue on the campus of the Horev School. "That's on Avishai Street, right?" the Rebbe asked, "How does your father get there?" Totally surprised by the question, I related my father's route, to which the Rebbe replied that there was a shorter way to get there — by cutting through a parking lot.

It seems that the Rebbe was aware that my father had asthma and was trying to figure out a way to make the trip easier on him. His care amazed me to no end, but even more so his familiarity with every alley and shortcut in

Israel. Today we call that GPS!

At the end of the meeting, the Rebbe shook Rabbi Zolty's hand very warmly and escorted him out of the room.

I went away with the feeling that the Rebbe was a real leader of the Jewish people, who felt a responsibility towards the Nation of Israel, cared deeply about Israel's security, and of course about the Torah of Israel. But I am aware that any description that I might offer would be inadequate and would surely only diminish who this great man really was.

After heading the office of Rabbi Betzalel Zolty, the former chief rabbi of Jerusalem, Rabbi Avraham Backenroth went on to work as a rabbinical court representative and musician. He resides in Bnei Brak, where he was interviewed in April of 2015.

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

This week in....

> **5721 — 1961**, to a teacher who asked for advice as to how to deal with foul language in her class, the Rebbe gave her a message to develop and impart to the students: Since G-d loves every Jew "more than a parent loves an only child born in their old age," He is certainly listening closely to what is being said about his dear children. Of course, in the presence of a physical king, nobody would dare speak negatively about his kid, and before the King of Kings one must be even more careful. The Rebbe also suggested that she hang a sign in the classroom expressing this theme.¹ *19 Shevat*

> **5722 — 1962**, the Rebbe addressed a question that people have on the Chabad way of life. Chabad's acronym, "wisdom, understanding, and knowledge," indicates that one must internalize the deep concepts of *chasidic* philosophy. But how can this be accomplished while going out and teaching the uninitiated on the most basic level? The Rebbe explained that the *only* way to truly internalize the wellsprings of *chasidic* teachings is to place an emphasis on sharing them with others, as well.² *15 Shevat*

1. Igrot Kodesh vol. 20 page 142 2. Torat Menachem vol. 33 page 87

In honor of our dear husband, father, grandfather and great grandfather, **Robert Nedelman**

רחמיאל בן נחום ע"ה

Yahrzeit, 17 Shevat

By **Robin & Steven Weltman**

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