

HERE'S my STORY

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THE UNWITTING AUTHOR

RABBI SIMCHA RAZ



My family was very close with Rabbi Aryeh Levine, the famed "tzaddik of Jerusalem" whose extraordinary capacity to help his fellow Jews — whether the sick, poor or those suffering under the British regime during the Mandate of Palestine (1920-1948) — made him a legend in his time. He often visited us and, whenever he came, it fell to me to walk him back home. On those walks, he always took pains to ask me about my studies and would often invite me inside his house to carry on our conversation. And so, from the age of twelve, I forged my own connection with him, which continued for over thirty years. I came to see Rav Aryeh as the wisest person I'd ever met; he became a mentor whom I sought out whenever I needed advice. And, after his passing in 1969, I published an article memorializing him in the weekly journal *Panim el Panim*.

At the time I was working for the advancement of the study of the Hebrew language in the Diaspora, which brought me to New York in 1970, when I had the privilege of meeting the Lubavitcher Rebbe. As soon as I walked into the Rebbe's office and introduced myself, he exclaimed, "I read an article about Rav Aryeh Levin in *Panim el Panim* written by Simcha Raz. Is that you?"

After I confirmed that I was one and the same, the Rebbe asked me if Rav Aryeh had left behind any writings. In fact, Rav Aryeh did leave a number of manuscripts, including an explanation of the entire Mishnah, parts of which were eventually published. At that time, however, his only published work was a booklet about the famous Kabbalist known as the Leshem, who had been Rav Aryeh's mentor. I told this to the Rebbe, adding that Rav Aryeh was a "walking Torah," and I quoted a number of teachings that I had heard from him.

I followed that up with some stories about Rav Aryeh which seemed to fascinate the Rebbe. At a certain point the Rebbe's secretary interrupted, saying that an hour had passed and I needed to finish up. "Forgive me," I immediately apologized, "I know I was supposed to be here only for ten minutes." But the Rebbe urged me to continue. So another hour passed as I told him more about Rav Aryeh.

Altogether, the meeting lasted two-and-a-half hours and, at its conclusion, the Rebbe suggested that I write down all that I had told him. He said there is a lot to be learned from the lives of righteous people — such stories penetrate the hearts and seep into the soul, and sometimes influence the readers even more than words of Torah. At the time I hadn't considered writing a book about Rav Aryeh, but the Rebbe's words stayed with me, and I began collecting the recollections of others.

During my research, I discovered that Rav Aryeh and the Rebbe exchanged a number of letters. Rav Aryeh's grandson told me that he had visited the Rebbe once and told him of Rav Aryeh's distress at being harshly criticized by some elements in the ultra-Orthodox community for showing love and friendship to those Jews whom they disapproved of. The Rebbe had a fabulous response. "We read in *Pirkei Avot*, 'One who is pleasing to his fellow human beings, is pleasing to G-d.' It does not say, 'One who is pleasing to the very righteous and pious people,' but simply 'his fellow human beings,' the ordinary folk out in the street!"

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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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That story and the many others I collected were eventually assembled into a book published in Hebrew as *Ish Tzaddik Haya* and in English as *A Tzaddik in Our Time*.

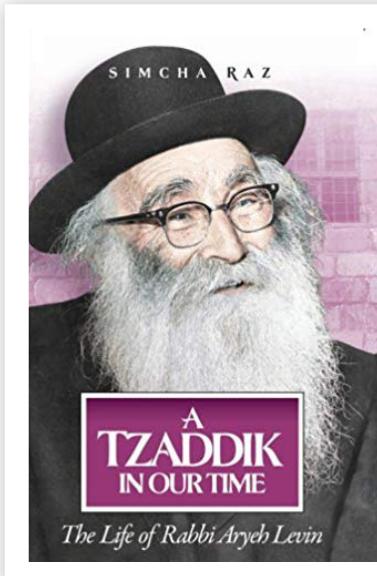
This book was hugely successful and was reprinted more than thirty times, as well as translated into Russian and French. I continued writing and eventually published a sequel entitled *Tzaddik Yesod Olam*, as well as other books about righteous men, including several giants of the chasidic world.

All this came from the impetus I first received from the Rebbe.

In addition to the profound effect that the meeting with the Rebbe had on my life, I was also left with a very strong impression of him as a truly holy man. When, before leaving, I mentioned that a woman I knew needed his blessing, he immediately rose from his chair to get a pencil and paper and asked, "What is her name and her mother's name?" Although the Rebbe was a world-class leader, the moment someone spoke to him of a person in need of a blessing, he dedicated his full attention to that individual.

Throughout the years I often corresponded with the Rebbe, and I sent him copies of my books, which he complimented. When he learned in 1978 that I was dispatched to Cape Town on behalf of the Zionist Federation of South Africa, where I was put in charge of the Jewish education system, he wrote to me that he hoped that in my new position I would still continue to write, since my writing was about authentic Judaism.

As a part of my job, I supported everyone who worked to advance Jewish culture, including the Chabad emissary in Cape Town, Rabbi Mendel Popack. When my two-



year contract ended, I was surprised to receive a letter from the Rebbe, saying that he hoped I wouldn't mind him suggesting, without being asked, that I extend my mission in South Africa. He said he was allowing himself to give me this unsolicited advice because he felt that the public good demands it. Of course, I followed his counsel and stayed on for another two years.

Of all the many people that I've met in my lifetime, the man who has most impressed me was the Rebbe. In my opinion, his character gives meaning to the words of the Book of Proverbs, "V'tzaddik yesod olam — a righteous man is the foundation of the world." Just like a tall building rises to the heavens due to its deep foundation although that foundation isn't seen and revealed to the eye, so too, the teachings of the tzaddik continue to inspire us — even if he has passed away and we cannot see him — as we learn from his ways.

*Rabbi Simcha Raz is the author of *A Tzaddik in Our Time: The Life of Rabbi Aryeh Levin*, as well as a number of books about Jewish leaders. He was interviewed in his home in Jerusalem in August of 2010.*

לע"ב ר' ישראלי יעקב וזوجתו מרתה קריינא ע"ה לאקשין
ע"י בנייהם ר' נחמן ור' אברהם ומשפחתם שיחיו

This week in....

> **5719 — 1959**, in a letter to a young couple who requested the Rebbe's advice on where to live, the Rebbe wrote that it has always been his opinion not to spend exorbitant amounts of money in order to live specifically in a certain neighborhood, and that the money should rather be used for either personal or communal necessities.¹ 1 Adar

> **5735 — 1975**, at an unexpected *farbrengen*, the Rebbe announced that as part of the ongoing Torah campaign, there would be a 25 percent sale off all books sold by Kehot, the Lubavitch publishing house, until after Passover. The Rebbe explained that he intentionally held the *farbrengen* on a weekday so the news could immediately be transmitted internationally.² 29 Shevat

1. Igrot Kodesh vol. 18 page 201 2. Sichot Kodesh vol. 1 page 417



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