

**HERE'S
my
STORY**

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PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

RABBI MEIR WUNDER

During the years when I was studying at the Ponevezh Yeshivah in Bnei Brak, Israel, I was put in charge of the book collection. Initially, this was a rotating assignment, with each student given this responsibility for four months, but I took it more seriously than most. I walked into the dusty old room filled with thousands of books and got to work. After my four months were up, the *Rosh Yeshivah*, Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, noticed that a revolution had taken place in the library; everything was organized and every book was easily accessible. He called me in and said, "I want to establish a paid position of librarian here, and I would like you to take the post."

This is how my work as librarian began. For eight years I managed the Ponevezh Yeshivah's library, which is considered a huge library in the *yeshivah* world, housing some twenty-five-thousand books. Through my work I learned to recognize the issues and challenges involved in organizing such a large collection, and on the *Rosh Yeshivah's* advice, I enrolled in professional courses in library science.

During my studies, I discovered that there were simple and effective solutions to the issues that I was struggling with, and I thought that it would be good for other Torah librarians to know about these solutions. This is how the idea to open a Center for Torah Libraries came up. We reached out to people in charge of Torah libraries of all types — in *yeshivahs*, in religious councils, in religious *kibbutzim* — and we began to offer professional training courses for their librarians, as well as developing a method of classification and cataloging especially adapted to Torah texts.

In 1970, I traveled to the United States for the first time, staying two months with relatives who lived in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. While there, I prayed at Chabad Headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway, and I requested a private audience with the Rebbe.

Although my appointment was set for 11 p.m. on the



night of the 30th of July, I had a long wait. It turned out that a delegation on behalf of Torah Umesorah, the National Society for Hebrew Day Schools, had come to speak with the Rebbe as well as other important people, and so I only went in at 6 a.m.!

Despite the late hour, the Rebbe spent twenty-two minutes with me, not rushing me at all. When I entered, he greeted me warmly, invited me to have a seat, and started reading the letter in which I listed — as I had been instructed in advance — all my questions, dealing mostly with the activities of the Center for Torah Libraries. Then he very patiently began to address my questions one by one.

He strongly encouraged the idea of the Center for Torah Libraries, and he gave it his blessing. He said that he saw great importance in strengthening holy literature as a counterweight to all the harmful literature that is published elsewhere.

We also spoke about our endeavor to classify Torah publications, and our most recent innovation — a detailed index of Torah articles published in various

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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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journals, making it easier for researchers to find materials on specific topics.

Having studied in Berlin and Paris, the Rebbe knew how things were organized in large university libraries. He noted that such libraries give great importance to bibliographies, but that Torah libraries don't, and there exists a terrible need for this in the Torah world. Therefore, he urged us to continue to publish our indexes of Torah literature in order to give more people access to various subjects.

Then the Rebbe, with his vast vision, proposed an original idea which we weren't even considering. Those of us working as librarians in Israel were mainly catering to a limited local circle of Hebrew speakers, but the Rebbe said that today academic institutions and public libraries in the United States and in the world at large were beginning to show interest in Jewish literature, and they were opening special departments devoted to this subject and also buying Jewish books. He encouraged us to think with a bigger picture in mind and to make sure that our publications would also be accessible in English.

As he spoke, the Rebbe continued to take me by surprise. "A Torah library is intended for Torah-observant people looking for holy books," he said, "but what about other people — those who would be too intimidated to enter a Torah library? How will they come upon these treasures?" He then suggested that we ask every public library to establish a section of Torah literature. This way, the general Jewish public will chance upon these Torah books and will be exposed to their message.

We hadn't even considered this possibility, but this original idea — which went along with the Rebbe's general approach to outreach — has since become a reality. Today, many public libraries contain a section of basic Jewish literature.

Also regarding the Torah libraries, the Rebbe stressed that we shouldn't wait for people to come to our libraries on their own initiative. Rather, we should reach out to them. He encouraged me to host events — such as lectures or concerts — and advertise them in order to attract people who wouldn't come of their own accord.

This method of attracting readers had been emphasized in the library science course I took, as well as the need to improve the look of a library. When I mentioned this, the Rebbe was all for it. He said, "If we want to draw the hearts of the readers, particularly of the younger generation, it is important to make the library a pleasant and attractive place. It should be clean, aesthetic and

inviting, and the books themselves should be well-kept, properly bound and not torn."

I had confided in the Rebbe that our budget was very tight, because we didn't have any sources of funding, and he pointed out that widening the circulation of our publications could serve as a source of income. I had also questioned whether I could approach people and charitable foundations for donations, being unsure if Torah libraries classified as a proper charity according to Jewish law. The Rebbe removed all doubts and stated explicitly that supporting Torah libraries is a charitable endeavor and that we could finance our activities with money from donations.

In the following years, we did raise the necessary funds, and the activities at the center did expand. We offered more cataloguing courses; we also published various instructional materials; and we assisted new libraries that opened up.

As a result, Torah libraries today are professionally organized, properly catalogued and easily accessible.

In addition, my conversation with the Rebbe was reported in a number of publications, and it had a big impact on the availability of Torah materials in English, which became accessible to those who are as yet far from Judaism. For this, the Rebbe's gets much credit.

Rabbi Meir Wunder is the founder and director of the Center for Torah Libraries. He was interviewed in his home in Jerusalem in February of 2011.

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

This week in....

> **5731 — 1971**, during a tense period in Israel following the War of Attrition, the Rebbe entered the Purim *farbrengen* late. He began his address by explaining that he was waiting to be informed that the *chasidim* who had gone to celebrate Purim with the IDF soldiers stationed at multiple fronts had returned home safely.
¹ 14 Adar

1. Sichot Kodesh 5731 vol. 1 page 509



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