

HERE'S  
my  
STORY

Generously sponsored by the  Crain-Maling Foundation

# STROLLING THE STREETS OF PARIS

**RABBI DAVID LESSELBAUM**



I was born in Paris, France, to a family that was distant from Torah observance. When World War Two broke out and the Nazis invaded France in 1940, my brother and I had to go into hiding — first in a Christian orphanage, then in a monastery, then in other Christian houses. After the war, our family reunited in Paris, though we were no more religious than before.

But then, when I was about to turn thirteen, my grandmother — who was still keeping some Jewish customs — asked me to make a Bar Mitzvah. I wasn't too enamored with the idea, but I cooperated for my beloved grandmother's sake. She took me to the synagogue known as the Rashi Shul in a nearby neighborhood, and that is where I prepared for and celebrated my Bar Mitzvah.

It later became clear that this was a crucial turning point in my life. In the months and years that followed, I continued to frequent the synagogue on Shabbat; I started attending Torah lessons here and there; I joined the religious youth group, Bnei Akiva; and at a certain point, I decided to keep kosher. Eventually, I enrolled in *yeshivah* — choosing the Chabad *yeshivah* in Lod, Israel, where I was later ordained as a rabbi. After getting married, I settled in Kfar Chabad, working as a teacher.

Now, what do the events of my life have to do with the Lubavitcher Rebbe?

I only discovered that many years later.

During a *farbrengen* in Kfar Chabad, Rabbi Zalman Sudakevitch, a Chabad *chasid* from Russia, related some stories from his colorful life. He said that while staying in Paris after the war, where he had escaped along with many other Chabad *chasidim*, two members of his group received an unusual instruction from the son-in-law of the Lubavitcher Rebbe — Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the future Rebbe — who was in Paris in 1947 in order to organize his mother's immigration to America. They were to go out and stroll the streets of Paris, so that the Jews who lived in the city should be exposed to their authentic Jewish appearance — full beards, prominent sidelocks, black hats and long black coats. Of course, they did as instructed, Rabbi Sudakevitch joining them.

As they were strolling in the 9th *arrondissement*, an elderly Jewish woman called out to them from a fifth-floor window. She asked them to wait while she came down to speak to them. She related that she had a grandson of Bar Mitzvah age, but lacked any Jewish education. She didn't know what to do or how to do it, but she was very adamant that this boy have a proper Bar Mitzvah. They happily informed her that there was a synagogue just down the street where Bar Mitzvah lessons could be arranged.

As I listened to this story, I tensed up. Could he be speaking about my grandmother? About me? I interrupted him to ask if he remembered the name of the synagogue to which he sent this woman. He did - the Rashi Shul.

My heart skipped a beat. I ran the details through my mind to make sure that they did indeed fit together. My grandmother did not live in the 9th *arrondissement* - she lived in the 20th *arrondissement* - but my aunt (her daughter) did live there, in an apartment on the 5th floor, and the Rashi Shul was down the street from her house.

And then it hit me — those *chasidim* were the Rebbe's

*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

messengers sent to put me on my path to Jewish observance — and eventually, a full-fledged *chasid*.

Long before I put the pieces together, the Rebbe — who had taken over the leadership of Chabad-Lubavitch following the Previous Rebbe's passing in 1950 — called upon me to fulfill a difficult mission.

This happened in 1958, after I had gotten married and was living in Kfar Chabad. In the *shul* there, during the dancing with the Torah on Simchat Torah, I made an acquaintance with a visitor, Yaakov Zerubavel, an important left-wing politician in Israel whose wife coincidentally came from the Lesselbaum family and was a distant relative of mine.

Subsequently, in one of my letters to the Rebbe I mentioned that I had met Mr. Zerubavel. I received a response that I had not expected and certainly was not prepared for. The Rebbe wanted me to go to Mr. Zarubavel — a man with a strong and assertive personality who often expressed animosity toward religion — and tell him in the Rebbe's name that now was the time for him to change his attitude. The Rebbe wrote that I should relate in his name that he was convinced that Mr. Zerubavel's negative actions at the time were not the result of deep contemplation, but because he was accustomed to such behavior. The Rebbe continued:

Certainly, he has had doubts [about his path in life] for quite a while, but he has tried to silence them, and when they come into his mind, he immediately pushes them away, as is human nature. In general, people are afraid to reevaluate whether their way of life is correct, for this requires extraordinary strength of character. But because he has an influence on many others, he must do so — for any improvement in himself will be doubled many times over by his followers.

And then the Rebbe added an astonishing sentence:

A sign that the time has come for him to review and evaluate his past behavior will be the dream he had just before your conversation with him.

As you can imagine, it was hard for me to work up the *chutzpah* to complete this mission the Rebbe had given me, so I stalled. Nearly three months passed and, still, I had done nothing. Finally, I gathered the courage to see Mr. Zarubavel. However, I soon learned that my fears had been unfounded. When I told him on the phone that I

had a message for him from the Lubavitcher Rebbe, he immediately invited me to his office in Tel Aviv.

I was worried that I wouldn't be able to give over the Rebbe's words precisely, so I simply read out the Rebbe's letter to Mr. Zerubavel. While I did so, he stood and listened until the end. When I concluded and began to leave, he requested that I send him a copy of the letter.

At the time, copying documents wasn't a trivial matter, and I was debating if I should take the trouble to make a copy for him. I reported on the meeting to the Rebbe, who responded that I should refrain until Mr. Zerubavel makes another, specific request.

And he did. The next time I saw him, he scolded me angrily for not having brought him a copy of the Rebbe's letter. That is when I understood that this matter meant a great deal to him, so I made a copy for him.

I do not know how the Rebbe's letter affected Mr. Zerubavel's life from that point on until he passed away nine years later, in 1967. The only thing I do know is that he has religious descendants, so I suspect the Rebbe's words found their mark.

*Rabbi David Lesselbaum — a member of the Kfar Chabad community — teaches Torah and Judaism to the Israeli-French community. He was interviewed in his home in Kfar Chabad, Israel, in March of 2013.*

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

## This week in....

> **5719 — 1959**, in a letter to an individual who wanted to produce postage stamps with a picture of the Alter Rebbe, the Rebbe wrote that in his opinion this was a misguided idea since the stamps will be canceled with a postmark across them, and will wind up in the garbage.<sup>1</sup> 22 Adar I

> **5735 — 1975**, at a public address, the Rebbe spoke about a new initiative for people to regularly study the Code of Jewish Law written by the Alter Rebbe, beginning with the Laws of Torah Study.<sup>2</sup> 18 Adar

1. Igrot Kodesh vol. 18 page 226 2. Sichot Kodesh 5735 vol. 1 page 496

Dedicated by Rabbi **Moshe & Libby Lazaros**  
In honor of our children

In loving memory of our dear father  
Rabbi **Shmuel Fogelman**, of blessed memory  
ר' שמואל אליהו בן חיים אלחנן ע"ה  
By **Chaim and Rikal Fogelman** and family

You can help us record more testimonies by dedicating future editions of *Here's My Story*



Download the app today at [Tefillinwrapp.com](http://Tefillinwrapp.com)  
**Let's get Am Yisroel Wrapping!**



Supported by members of

THE  
**JEM FOUNDATION**

ואתה תצווה... להעלות נר תמיד