

HERE'S
my
STORY

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WITH ALL DUE RESPECT

RABBI YESHAYAHU WEBER

During my childhood, my father traveled from Israel to the United States frequently and was away for long periods of time. That is when my uncle, Rabbi Moshe Weber, would take over, educating me and guiding me like a father. He served as the spiritual mentor of Chabad's Toras Emes *yeshivah*, which was then located in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Meah Shearim near our home. As a young boy I was very influenced by the lively atmosphere in this *yeshivah* and became friendly with some of the students.

I was nine years old the first time that I wrote to the Rebbe. I had been sent to study in Bnei Brak, in a Torah academy affiliated with the Ponovezh *yeshivah*, and I began to question whether I belonged there. Although I wasn't unhappy, I felt separated from the Chabad way of life to which Rabbi Moshe had introduced me. So I decided to write a letter to the Rebbe, expressing that I liked Chabad very much and that I wanted to be in touch with him. I wrote in innocence, like a child who was trying to make contact with an uncle, and I wrote in secret, not telling anyone about it.

This was because my father — who was a G-d-fearing and learned Jew — wanted to bring me up in a neutral way. He didn't oppose my having a connection to Chabad; indeed, he had some sort of connection to the Rebbe himself. But he did not want me to become a *chasid* and, throughout the years, there was friction between us because of this.

As my Bar Mitzvah approached, I wrote to the Rebbe again. At this time I wanted to grow long *peyot* — the distinctive sidelocks that the *chasidim* in Jerusalem wore — but I knew that my father wouldn't like the idea. My father was visiting America then, and not knowing how huge America was, I asked the Rebbe in my letter to please tell my father, if he happened to see him, to allow me to grow long *peyot*.



My father returned just before my Bar Mitzvah, and I noticed that he was a bit upset and didn't have much to say to me. Later I found out that my father visited the Rebbe on *Motzaei Pesach*, following the Passover holiday. During *Kos Shel Brachah*, when the Rebbe distributed wine from his cup, the Rebbe told him, "If your son wants to be careful in his observance of the *mitzvot*, you should allow him."

When I heard what the Rebbe had said, I interpreted it as a sign that he took me seriously. This really clinched my connection to the Rebbe.

About a year after my Bar Mitzvah, in 1961, my family moved to America. We arrived close to Passover, and Rabbi Uriel Zimmer, who was very friendly with my father, took us to Chabad Headquarters to receive *matzah* from the Rebbe's hands. Until then I had never seen the Rebbe, nor even a photo of him, but I pictured him in my imagination as looking like one of the Chasidic rebbes that I was used to seeing in Israel. I was sure he would be old, have a big white beard and

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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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long *peyot*, and that he would be wearing a big furry *streimel*.

As we waited in line, I saw an ordinary-looking but also very dignified middle-aged gentleman standing at the entrance of the room and giving out *matzahs*. I assumed that this was the Rebbe's secretary — he must be distributing the *matzahs* on behalf of the Rebbe, who was probably sitting in the next room, I thought. But as we got closer, I saw that everyone was treating him with a lot of respect, even awe, and then I realized with some surprise that this had to be the Rebbe himself. When our turn came, my father introduced me, saying, "This is my son," and the Rebbe responded, "I know him; he writes me letters."

After we settled in America, I enrolled in Yeshiva Torah Vodaas, as my father wished, and did not have much to do with Chabad. But from time to time we would participate in the Rebbe's *farbrengens*, and on one such occasion, when I approached the Rebbe during *Kos shel Bracha*, he said to me, "From over there you sent me letters, but when you're here I don't see you!" This statement awakened in me the dormant feeling of connection I previously had.

In 1964, I decided to switch to a Chabad *yeshiva*. I had several friends who had gone to study in the Tomchei Temimim *yeshiva* in Montreal, and that is where I also wanted to be.

From the first day at Tomchei Temimim, I felt I was returning home — that this was my natural place. I decided to live as a Chabad *chasid*. My father, however, opposed this. He told me at the time that I was hurting him very much with the path I had chosen.

His words disturbed me greatly and I requested a private audience with the Rebbe to discuss this matter.

The Rebbe predicted that my father would change his mind. He said, "I know your father; he is a learned man. Jewish law is clear that if a son wants to travel away from home because he is certain that he will see success in his studies in another city, but his father protests this, he doesn't have to obey his father."

He went on, "The *Code of Jewish Law* lists this *halachah* in the chapter about the laws of honoring one's parents, even though it would be more logical to list it with the laws of Torah study. After all, it is justifying

not obeying one's father — which seems counter to honoring him — in order to study Torah. But the point here is that if the son studies where his heart desires, he will succeed in his Torah studies, and this will bring his father *nachas*. So in this case, the son is really honoring his father by disobeying him."

Then the Rebbe described in detail what happens if we don't follow this *halachah*: "If the son doesn't study in a place that his heart desires, he will not see success. The result will be that he won't learn with eagerness and will slowly start feeling badly about himself. This might lead to a situation where he will seek out bad companions and will gradually deteriorate until he leaves the *yeshiva* where he was unhappy. It is obvious that this will cause his father great grief."

It struck me later that the Rebbe analyzed so clearly the process which would make a student drop out of a *yeshiva* — and how it all begins with not succeeding in one's studies — an issue which I dealt with a lot throughout my career.

Needless to say, ultimately my father came to see things differently — he derived a great deal of satisfaction from my success in *yeshiva* and, later, from my family and his grandchildren. I didn't disappoint him. In fact, he told me that I had brought him *nachas*.

Rabbi Yeshayahu Weber, an educator, is the founder and director of the Ruth Institute for children with learning disabilities. He was interviewed in his home in Jerusalem in March of 2014.

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

This week in...

> **5727 — 1967**, during a holiday meal, the topic of wearing a silk *kapote* on Shabbat was brought up, and the Rebbe mentioned the kabbalistic reason for this practice, as explained in a discourse of the Rebbe Rashab.¹ 22 Nissan

1. Torat Menachem vol. 49 page 335

In honor of the 80th birthday of
Rabbi **Chaim Fishman** of Worcester, Massachusetts

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devotion to Chabad of Worcester

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