

HERE'S my STORY

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THE INCREDIBLE MIDNIGHT QUESTION

RABBI YECHIEL ZISKIND



While I was studying in the Chabad yeshivah in 770 Eastern Parkway, I came down with polio. This was in 1955, the same year that the Jewish doctor, Jonas Salk, introduced the polio vaccine, but it came out too late for me. I caught a bad case of the disease, which started as a cold, but it progressed from there.

Polio, for those who are too young to remember, was a contagious disease that has since been totally eradicated in the Western World, but it used to kill a lot of people. It disabled the muscles, so the afflicted person could not walk or even breathe, and the standard form of treatment then was to put the sick into an iron lung and hope for the best.

I was taken to the Kingston Avenue Hospital, which no longer exists, but back then was the chief hospital for contagious diseases. I was put into an iron lung, which looked something like a large water boiler, with only my head sticking out. This iron lung did the compression work of my paralyzed chest muscles and thus got oxygen into my body. But I was very, very sick.

The doctor who was taking care of me had an arrogant way of speaking and he told my father and brother, "G-d knows if he'll live out the next twelve hours."

Hearing that, they went to the Rebbe and told him what my prognosis was. But the Rebbe just made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "He'll outlive the doctor," he declared. And he gave me many blessings for recovery.

I lasted longer than the doctor's prognosis of twelve hours, but I continued my confinement in the iron lung. My yeshivah colleagues — Kehos Wiess, Mottel Zajac and Berel Baumgarten — had been instructed by the Rebbe to visit me every day to make sure I had kosher food and to put *tefillin* on me. When the doctor saw them, he said, "Don't bother with him ... Just let him die in peace." They reported this to the Rebbe who told them the same thing he told my father and brother, "He will outlive the doctor."

And, tragically, that's exactly what happened. Two days later, the doctor caught polio himself and died.

I stayed in the iron lung through the summer — June, July, August and September — and then was transferred to a hospital on Welfare Island (what is today Roosevelt Island) for recovery. During this period, whenever the Rebbe distributed wine from his cup during *kos shel brachah* at the end of a holiday, he always gave some to my father to bring to me.

Through G-d's kindness, I recovered, even though it took over two years and, afterwards, I had to use a wheelchair for a while and then I couldn't walk without crutches. I was still in the wheelchair when my family accompanied me back to yeshivah. While we were in the hallway, the Rebbe was heading to the synagogue for the *Maariv* prayer. When he spotted us, he immediately turned around and invited us into his office.

During that audience, he told me, "In my opinion, you will become completely healthy," and then he asked me, "Reb Yechiel, what are you doing to find a match for marriage?"

"The Rebbe means now?" I asked, surprised. Here I was, just out of rehab, getting around in a wheelchair, and the Rebbe was telling me to look for a wife!

"Absolutely," he said, with a smile. "Not right now. Now is the middle of the night, so it's a little late. But tomorrow you should get on it."

"But I have debts," I countered, explaining that I had just bought a car, and certainly I didn't have the income to support a wife and family.

To this the Rebbe responded, "Don't worry. G-d sustains two and a half billion people in the world; he'll sustain a few more."

At this juncture, my father asked, "The Rebbe means in his current condition?"

I'll never forget the Rebbe's amazing answer: "His condition is obvious. The girl can decide whether it's for her or not. But

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I know of cases where the issues are not obvious, and people aren't open with each other. In his situation, there's nothing to reveal, it is what it is."

Then the Rebbe said to me, "Es vet zain noch a trit in yam — It will just be another step in your journey. Just as G-d helped you to survive, He will help you to get married, as well."

Believe it or not, the very next day, a woman called my aunt

saying she saw me and she thought she had a match for me, a girl who had also recovered from polio. Her name was Leah Lipkind, and she became my wife and the mother of our children.

Rabbi Yechiel Ziskind was active in the field of kosher supervision, working with the Orthodox Union and Vaad Harabonim of Queens until his passing in 2012. He was interviewed in February of 2011.

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