

HERE'S my STORY

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CAKE AND JUICE WITH ROYALTY

RABBI YOSEF YITZCHOK HOLTZMAN



Rabbi Holtzman at his wedding in 1985

My story begins with the story of my father — Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Holtzman — and his relationship with the Rebbe and his wife, Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka.

My father was a child survivor of the Holocaust who ended up in a Chabad orphanage in Paris, and this is where he met Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the future Rebbe. Rabbi Schneerson had come to Paris in 1947 to meet his mother, who had escaped from the Soviet Union, and escort her to New York. During his stay, he visited the orphanage and tested the kids on their Torah knowledge, awarding prizes. My father, who was thirteen at the time, used this opportunity to ask the Rebbe if he could come to America. A year later this was arranged and he came to Crown Heights and enrolled in the central Chabad *yeshivah* there.

In 1954, his relationship with the Rebbe and the Rebbetzin began. That year, the Rebbetzin had gone

to Europe for a few weeks and, during her absence, the Rebbe's meals were prepared by a local cook. My father was selected to pick up the food and serve it to the Rebbe. And then, after the Rebbetzin returned, he continued to help out. For about four years, he filled the role of their handyman — helping them prepare for Passover and Sukkot — and this is how their house became his home away from home, so to speak.

Since he had lost his father during the war and his mother lived far away in Europe, the Rebbetzin looked after him. When he started dating, she told him, "It's not appropriate that you should go on every date in the same suit," and she gave him one of the Rebbe's old suits to wear, so that he would have another. (The Rebbe then was no longer wearing a suit but a *kapote* — the black rabbinical coat — so this must have been one that he no longer needed.)

After he got married, the Rebbetzin gave my father a set of silver cutlery as a present. Even when he moved with my mother to Belgium, she stayed in touch with him and once, upon hearing that he was sick, she asked someone in London to send special medicine to him. That's how she took care of him.

In later years, when my parents visited New York with us kids, we always came to see the Rebbetzin. And even though she was a person of authority, she felt like an aunt or grandmother, a member of the family to us.

I recall on one of our visits when I was about nine years old, my two brothers and I were playing in the house which seemed enormous to us. "Wow, you have such a big house," I said to the Rebbetzin, "but

continued on reverse



EVENTS. IDEAS.
PERSONALITIES.

Marking 70 years from the anniversary of the Rebbe's leadership, each week, JEM will be focusing on one event, idea or personality in the Rebbe's life.



continued from reverse

there are no kids here. So what do you need such a big house for?"

Before she could answer, I realized that there was an obvious explanation, so I said, "The kids must be all grown up and they don't live here anymore."

The Rebbetzin's response to a little boy who didn't realize that he was committing a *faux pas* was brilliant, "*Richtig, richtig. Aleh chasidim zeinen di Rebbe's kinder* — You are correct. All the *chasidim* are the Rebbe's children."

She also handled my younger brother Noach brilliantly. While she was serving us ice cream, my brother asked to scoop it out for himself. Of course, he was likely to make a mess, but she didn't refuse him for that reason. Instead, she said, "If you are going to take it yourself, you're not going to take enough." And how could a little kid object to getting more ice cream?

Subsequently, as a teenager, I came to New York to study in the Chabad *yeshivah* from 1980 until 1985. And during those years, I followed my father's lead and visited the Rebbetzin regularly.

I'd call her up to ask how she was doing and, inevitably, she would say "Come over, come over for a visit." I'd go to her house and chat with her — telling her about what I was learning in the *yeshivah*, what was going on with my family and things like that — while she gave me cake with pineapple juice.

Once, I didn't feel well and, not having any relatives in the country, I called her. She immediately offered to send over some Vitamin C but none of my friends would go to pick it up for me — they were just too intimidated to go to the Rebbe's house. Finally, I convinced someone, but it struck me that while I felt so comfortable there, my friends couldn't even imagine crossing the threshold.

In the early 1980s the Rebbe and the Rebbetzin began to spend Shabbat in the library adjacent to Chabad Headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway. While the Rebbe was at 770, I used to visit the Rebbetzin to wish her "*Gut Shabbos*" and eat there sometimes.

In honor of our dear husband,
father, grandfather and great grandfather

Robert Nedelman

רחמיאל בן נחום ע"ה

Yahrzeit, 17 Shevat

and in loving memory of

Gary Corn,

גרשון בן אפרים

By **Robin & Steven Weltman**

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Once she invited me to make the *Kiddush* blessing and have some cake, but the wine on the table was in a fancy crystal bottle — for the Rebbe, I assumed — so I declined.

She immediately figured out why I was reluctant and said, "What are you worried about? You think this is for my husband? Don't worry."

So I made myself comfortable and ate everything like it had been prepared for me because she encouraged me to.

Later on, when I told this to my father, he said, "Of course that fancy bottle was for the Rebbe!" But this is how she was — she wanted to make me comfortable; she didn't want me to feel deprived of anything.

When I got married in 1985, I asked the Rebbetzin for a favor — if I could borrow one of the Rebbe's shirts to wear under the *chuppah*, as is the Chabad custom. And she immediately obliged. I took it to Israel where I got married, and afterwards I returned it to her.

My brother Uri did the same thing, but when he was done with it, he asked her if he could keep it, and she said, "Wear it in good health."

That is how she was — the most good-hearted person, who was also a queen — but I will always remember her as my caring, loving grandmother.

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Holtzman is the Chabad emissary to SUNY Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn, New York. He was interviewed in February of 2019.

This week in....

לע"נ ר' ישראל יעקב וזוגתו מרת קריינא ע"ה לאקשין

> **5713 — 1953**, the Rebbe participated in the *upshernish* of three year old Yossy Goldman, at the request of the child's grandfather, Rabbi Yochanan Gordon. After cutting some of the boy's hair, the Rebbe shared a Torah thought related to the custom of holding an *upshernish*.¹ 23 Shevat

1. Torat Menachem vol. 7 page 339

MY ENCOUNTER
with the **REBBE**

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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