

HERE'S my STORY

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THE PIVOTAL KODAK MOMENT

RABBI GERSHON SCHUSTERMAN



Growing up, I was a rambunctious child. I was impatient and had a penchant for sparring with authority, regularly testing my teachers in the Chabad *yeshivah* I attended. In their perceived wisdom, they treated me with “applied psychology,” which was sometimes applied to my personality and sometimes to parts of my anatomy. In another words, they did what they thought they needed to do to keep me out of trouble.

But get in trouble I still did as when I decided, at age eleven, to take a picture of the Rebbe.

In those days — I am speaking about 1958 here — there were few candid photos of the Rebbe because he would frown at picture-taking of him; the only ones available were shots taken by Trainer Studios of the Rebbe officiating at weddings. But I was determined to get my own with my Kodak Instamatic camera.

After one wedding, I waited for him as he came up the staircase to his office. When he emerged, I snapped my photo, setting off the flash which seemed to startle him, and hastily entered the adjacent study hall, pleased with my success.

But the Rebbe cared too much to let this go. Instead of going to his office, he turned in the other direction, following me

into the study hall. Suddenly I found the Rebbe looking straight at me with the evidence — my camera — dangling around my neck.

“Who is your teacher?” the Rebbe asked me in Yiddish. When I gave the name, he continued, “Is your teacher pleased with you?” I thought he was, but I didn’t how to say it without sounding pompous, so I just shrugged and said nothing.

“*Dein gantzeh Chasidus bashteit in photographia?* — Does being a *chasid* consist just of photography for you?” the Rebbe challenged me.

I didn’t know how to respond to that either, so again I said nothing. At that point, my principal, Rabbi Mendel Tenenbaum, must have spotted that I was in trouble since he appeared out of the blue. “Test him,” the Rebbe instructed Rabbi Tenenbaum, “if he passes, fine, but if not, take away the apparatus.”

As soon as the Rebbe walked away, Rabbi Tenenbaum asked me to hand over my camera. I argued, citing the Rebbe’s words that it should only be taken from me if and when I failed the test. But Rabbi Tenenbaum would have none of it. “Give me the camera,” he demanded. The next day, he called me into his office, tested me on the subject of Talmud that we were studying, and when I passed, he returned my camera.

I developed the photo of the Rebbe, and though it wasn’t very good, I made copies and sold them (as well as other photos I had taken) to the *chasidim* around the neighborhood.

This was not the only time that my behavior brought me to the Rebbe’s attention. On another occasion I did poorly on a test in school, and after the results were in, Rabbi Tenenbaum called me into his office. He informed me that Rabbi Hodakov, chief of the Rebbe’s secretariat, wanted to see me that night at nine o’clock.

Nine o’clock at night was an unusually late hour for me to be out of the house, so I had to tell my mother why I would not be coming home at the regular time. “What did you do wrong?” she instantly asked. But all I could say was “I don’t know.”

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

When I arrived at his office that night, Rabbi Hodakov was very gracious. He invited me to sit down, and I could see that he had a list of names in front of him and that my name was on the list.

"You had a test at the *yeshivah* recently?" he asked.

I acknowledged that I did.

"The report of the test was submitted to the Rebbe along with your mark. And the Rebbe instructed me to ask you, '*Hayitochan?*'"

This was the Rebbe's one-word message in Hebrew, which translates as a combination of "How could this be?" and, "Is this appropriate?"

I swallowed hard.

As much as I didn't want to be called on the carpet for doing poorly on the test, I was also deeply touched that the Rebbe cared about me so much that he took the time to learn what mark I received on the test and to let me know, via Rabbi Hodakov, that he was sure I could do better.

Until today, I think of this as a pivotal moment in my life.

Fast forward a year later to just before my Bar Mitzvah. For this occasion, my parents escorted me to a private audience with the Rebbe during which he asked me, among other things, what I planned to speak about at the celebration. I said that, as was the custom, I would recite a *chasidic* discourse as well as a *pilpul*, an analysis of a challenging topic in Jewish law.

"What is the subject of the *pilpul*?" the Rebbe wanted to know.

I answered that the subject had been assigned by my teacher, Rabbi Yitschok Ushpal. I was going to explain whether the *tefillin* one puts on the head and the *tefillin* one puts on the arm represent two halves of one *mitzvah* or are two separate *mitzvahs*.

"What difference would it make?" the Rebbe continued.

I answered that if it's one *mitzvah*, a man who is (Heaven forbid) missing an arm wouldn't be able to put on *tefillin* at all, as a person can't fulfill half a *mitzvah*. But if the two represent two separate *mitzvahs*, he can put on the head *tefillin*.

"But what if he is missing a head?" the Rebbe asked.

I was taken aback by what I perceived to be an absurd question, not knowing if the Rebbe was being serious or just testing me to hear my response. "That cannot be," I blurted out.

The Rebbe repeated his question, and again I answered "That cannot be."

He then asked the question for the third time, but I persisted: "That cannot be."

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And then the Rebbe broke out in a smile.

After that, the Rebbe asked me, "Do you have money of your own?"

I wasn't about to confess that I was amassing a small fortune selling photos of him, so I truthfully answered that I had some money because I had sometimes worked in my father's printing shop that past summer.

The Rebbe didn't question me further about my other sources of income, but he told me that I should donate some of my own money to charity before morning and afternoon prayers on the day of my Bar Mitzvah. Of course, he knew about my continued interest in photography, and he probably knew that I was quite the entrepreneur, with a salesforce of friends to whom I paid a commission for every Rebbe photo sold. That's probably why the Rebbe had asked that question, because he noticed everything, understood everything, and cared about everything.

Rabbi Gershon Schusterman served as a Chabad emissary in southern California for 18 years (from 1971 to 1989). Since then, he has been engaged in private enterprise in Los Angeles, while continuing to serve as a counselor and spiritual mentor to the Chabad community and writing on Jewish topics.

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This week in....

> **5689 — 1929**, passing through Berlin en route to Israel on his historic trip, the Previous Rebbe was greeted at the train station by the Rebbe and Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka, who had married several months prior. They proceeded to a hotel where they discussed the young couple's plans for the future. The Previous Rebbe noted that the Rebbe seemed distraught about his father, the rabbi of yekaterinoslav, who was being persecuted by the Soviet government.¹ 23 Tammuz

> **5715 — 1955**, to an individual who asked for ideas to combat laziness, the Rebbe suggested studying chapter 41 of Tanya in depth and memorizing it. "Meditating on even the simple meaning of the words," the Rebbe concluded, "with be enough to drive away any laziness."² 24 Tammuz

1. The Previous Rebbe's diary, quoted in Yemei Melech vol. 1 page 317
2. Igrot Kodesh vol. 11 page 280



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