

## HERE'S my STORY

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# WHEN THE IDF ALMOST OCCUPIED DAMASCUS

**DR. ARYEH MORGENSTERN**

While I worked in New York for the Jewish Agency for Israel, serving as director of the department of Torah education and culture in the United States and Canada, I often visited Chabad headquarters to participate in the Rebbe's *farbrengens*. Since I and my colleagues were recognized as senior representatives of the State of Israel, we were invited each time to sit near the front where the Rebbe and other distinguished *chasidim* would sit.

On the eve of Simchat Torah of 1973 — which fell two weeks after the start of the Yom Kippur War — I came with my friend Dr. Shlomo Levin, then consul in charge of religious affairs at the Israeli Consulate General in New York. Since we were from Israel, the holiday had already ended for us, but we still came to join the celebration and see the Rebbe.

When the war broke out, I got busy organizing public events — such as pro-Israel rallies of Jewish students outside the UN building — but the news coming out of Israel was quite depressing. Still, I knew that if there was any place where I could hear an uplifting message and gain some encouragement it would be at the Rebbe's *farbrengen*.

When Shlomo and I entered the synagogue, it was already packed with thousands of *chasidim*. Despite the crush, as soon as the Rebbe noticed us, he signaled that we should approach him. Although the *hakafot* — the dances with the Torah — were about to start, the Rebbe began speaking with us about the situation in Israel.

The huge hall fell silent as everyone tried to hear what the Rebbe was saying to us. And he said a great deal — in fact, the conversation lasted a full hour as the Rebbe laid out in detail his view of the situation and his recommendations, based on Torah sources, as to how Israel should act. He



wanted Shlomo and me to pass on this message to the heads of the Israeli government.

He began on an optimistic note, noting that this war did not present an existential threat to Israel. But, interestingly and contrary to the widespread thinking of the time, he felt that most of the war effort should be concentrated to the north in the battle with Syria, and not in the south in the battle with Egypt. This was surprising, as the conventional thinking perceived Egypt to be the main threat.

At that juncture in the war, Israel already pushed back the Egyptian forces and even succeeded in crossing the Suez Canal and advancing further south. But the Rebbe argued that further invasion of Egyptian territory would not produce any real gains, since there was no possibility of changing Israel's strategic position there. The ultimate and more difficult enemy of Israel, the Rebbe stressed, was Syria, whose ancient capital, Damascus, was regarded as a symbol of strength by the whole Arab world. "I don't

*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.*



understand why Israel isn't moving forward to conquer Damascus," he said.

It is worthwhile to note that, at that point, Israel had already recovered from the initial shock of the combined attack by the Arab armies, which surprised even the military intelligence agencies, and had moved from defense to offense. The Rebbe thought that the IDF had to take advantage of this momentum and not be satisfied with returning to the pre-war borders.

The Rebbe argued that conquering Damascus, if only for a short time, would not only enable the rescue of Israeli captives, but cause the collapse of the Syrian regime, which was leading the opposition to the very existence of the State of Israel. As long as the government in Damascus stood strong, the Rebbe argued, there would be no peace with the Arab world.

In this context, the Rebbe quoted Tractate Megillah of the Talmud: "If someone tells you, 'Both Caesarea and Jerusalem were destroyed,' don't believe it. 'They both stand' — don't believe it. But if someone tells you 'Caesarea was destroyed and Jerusalem stands,' or 'Jerusalem was destroyed and Caesarea stands' — that you can believe."

Just like the city of Caesarea at its prime symbolized the strength of the Roman Empire in the Middle East, so Damascus presently symbolized the strength of the Arab League. The Rebbe was convinced that utilizing this opportunity to vanquish Damascus would bring peace once and for all in the north and free up Israel's vital resources.

In response, we tried to explain that the decision makers in Israel were concerned about the reaction of the Soviets who had taken the Syrians under their wing, and had threatened to get involved in the war if Israel invaded Syria. The leaders in Israel feared that moving against Damascus would cause us to pay a very heavy and very bloody price. Furthermore, the US opposed our advancement into Syrian territory, and we didn't want to anger our top ally.

The Rebbe rejected these arguments one by one. Regarding the Soviets, he said that theirs were empty threats, and that there was nothing to be worried about. Regarding the Americans, he said that contrary to their declarations, they were actually quietly interested in Israel overpowering the Syrians. As for the potential loss of human life, the Rebbe suggested that more blood might be spilled in the future if the Arab threat was not reduced

now. This was the message that he wanted us to bring to the government in Israel — and he wanted us to transmit the message right away.

When the *hakafot* finally started, we stayed only for the first one, and then hurried out to fulfill our promise to the Rebbe to communicate his perspective to the powers that be. I phoned my friend Zevulun Hammer, one of the heads of the National Religious Party, and gave over to him the Rebbe's main points. He listened intently but said he feared that the Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan, would be too concerned about Soviet intervention to take this risk. Meanwhile, Shlomo called the office of the Prime Minister, Golda Meir, and communicated the same message, getting a similar response.

In retrospect, there is no doubt that the Rebbe was right in his strategic analysis. Syria is still a threat to Israel, serves as an extension of Iran, and is a base for the terror organization Hezbollah. As a result, the northern border is still not secure.

The Rebbe had immense influence in all Jewish circles the world over, and he had many connections, both known and unknown, with the heads of government in Israel. It is a shame that the solution he suggested was not accepted at that time. Who knows how many wars would have been prevented and how many lives would have been spared if Israeli leaders had listened to his bold advice back then.

*Dr. Aryeh Morgenstern, a Senior Fellow at Machon Shalem in Jerusalem, is a historian who specializes in the history of the Jewish settlement of Israel. He was interviewed in April of 2010.*

## This week in....

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

> **5716 - 1955**, in a letter to the Israeli branch of Agudas Chassidei Chabad, the Rebbe wrote that he was surprised that they hadn't utilized new avenues that had opened up to attain immigration visas for Jews in the Soviet Union. He alluded to the fact that the *chasidim* in Israel themselves were mostly Russian refugees and concluded, "certainly you will not be remiss and will immediately take to the task."<sup>1</sup> 16 Kislev

1. Igrot Kodesh vol. 12 page 154

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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