

HERE'S my STORY

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A MIGHTY MOTHER'S TRIUMPH

RABBI KALMAN SAMUELS

Our second child, Yossi, was born a perfectly healthy baby, but all that changed when he was only eleven months old. At that time, in the second half of 1977, the Ministry of Health in Israel had received two faulty batches of the DPT vaccine which normally protects a child against diphtheria, pertussis (also known as whooping cough) and tetanus. And, unfortunately, Yossi was one of the last kids to get this vaccine from the bad batch before the authorities realized there was a problem and stopped using it.

Sadly, he became blind, deaf and very hyperactive. Overnight, our lives had been turned upside-down.

I had been ordained as a rabbi and I thought that the rabbinate would be my future. But now it became apparent that it wouldn't be.

Because we couldn't get what we needed in Israel, we came to New York seeking medical intervention. My uncle, Dr. Hershel Samuels, was the co-director of the orthopedics department at Maimonides Medical Center, and he put us in touch with several top neuro-ophthalmologists. From them we learned very quickly that Yossi's optic nerve was damaged, and he would never see again.

As doctors in the US were being very helpful and forthcoming, we decided to stay on, and I began working in the computer field.

Then one day, in the Spring of 1981, while my uncle Hershel was visiting, he happened to mention one of his patients, a Mrs. Schneerson. He rarely spoke about those whom he treated, but he couldn't say enough good things about her — how eloquent she was, how cultured, how brilliant.

"Are you talking about Mrs. Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe's wife?" I asked.

Indeed, that is who he was talking about. So I said to him: "If you could get me a blessing from the Rebbe for Yossi, it would mean the world to me."



Yossi Samuels

"No problem," he responded. "Next time that Mrs. Schneerson comes to see me, I will ask her."

Six weeks later, he called me. "Mrs. Schneerson came in earlier and I told her that my nephew would like a blessing from her husband for his sick child," he said. "She promised to arrange it and she just called. You are to come to see the Rebbe at three o'clock tomorrow."

I got very excited, and I called Rabbi Yitzchok Wineberg, the Rebbe's emissary in Vancouver, my hometown. When he heard that I had an appointment, he laughed. "Kalman," he said, "even my father, a senior Chabad emissary, can't get to see the Rebbe. Your uncle means well, but I seriously doubt you will get to see the Rebbe in person." (Apparently as a result of his heart attack four years prior, private audiences with the Rebbe were no longer possible.)

However, I was not deterred. The next day, I took time off from work and drove to Chabad Headquarters in Crown Heights together with my wife Malki and Yossi. I left them in the car and ran into the building to see if this appointment was for real. It was! The Rebbetzin had indeed arranged it, and immediately after the brief afternoon prayers, Rabbi

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.



Binyomin Klein, the Rebbe's secretary, took us directly to the Rebbe.

Just before our visit, a famous neurologist had suggested putting Yossi into the hospital for several days to conduct a battery of tests, but Malki was very much against it. "I am not going to have him poked and prodded," she insisted. "He won't understand what is being done to him and he will be terrified. In any case, these tests may lead to nothing, as the doctor said. And they might even do him further damage."

We discussed this with the Rebbe at length, and he advised us to consult two experts. He said if the two experts agree that this is the best course of action, we should do what they recommend. But if they differ, then we should sit down with our uncle and decide together what to do. As it turned out, the experts differed, and we did not put Yossi in the hospital for all those tests.

While we were speaking with the Rebbe, Yossi was running around the office, because we just couldn't control him. The Rebbe gave him a nickel, he took it, ran around and threw it on the floor. Then the Rebbe gave him another nickel and he did the same thing. This happened several times.

Meanwhile, my wife and I were dying of embarrassment. Seeing our discomfort, the Rebbe reassured us, "Let the child be — he is demonstrating a healthy quality."

During the course of the conversation, I mentioned to the Rebbe that Yossi is a direct descendant of King David through his mother. At this point, the Rebbe turned his focus directly to Malki and, while addressing both of us, he looked her in the eye with a piercing gaze for several minutes.

It was an astonishing moment. Later I learned that according to *chasidic* teachings, whenever the Rebbe looks at somebody for a long time, it is to transmit spiritual strength to that person. Subsequently, Malki developed extraordinary strength, and she ended up founding Shalva, which has developed over the years to be one of the largest and most advanced centers for disability care and inclusion in the world.

As for Yossi, the Rebbe also saw in him something others couldn't see. Well-meaning people told my wife to put Yossi in an institution because it would be impossible for her to raise a family with him in the house. It's true that we had to watch him constantly. We could not have any glass in the house because he was so full of energy that he was likely to break things and hurt himself. At night, Malki would cry out to G-d, promising that if He would help Yossi, she would dedicate herself to helping others in the same situation.

And G-d did help Yossi. After we moved back to Israel, he merited to find the right teacher — Shoshana Weinstock

— who was deaf and had an amazing amount of patience. She would put one of his palms on the table and then would spell "table" via sign language into his other palm. She did this over and over again, for days on end, until he made the connection that these symbols stood for the object he was touching. When he finally got it, his face lit up and then there was no stopping him.

She went on to teach him the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet and then built up his vocabulary. As well, a speech therapist taught him to speak Hebrew synthetically. For the first time, at age eight, he was able to communicate. At that point, Malki sat me down and said that now it is time to make good on her promise to G-d. This is how the creation of Shalva was set in motion.

It soon became clear that Yossi was a brilliant child and, as the Rebbe had immediately seen, a child gifted with amazing tenacity.

Even when, at age twenty, he lost his ability to walk, he insisted on traveling. He wanted to ride elephants in Thailand, and he rode elephants in Thailand. It turned out that he had an amazing sense of smell, and he became a sommelier, a wine master. His wines, called "Yossi," are well received and are sold in the duty-free shops at Ben Gurion Airport.

That day when we met the Rebbe, he never stopped taking the Rebbe's nickels, and hopefully he will never lose that tenacity to always keep moving forward.

Rabbi Kalman Samuels is the co-founder and president of Shalva, the Israel Association for the Care and Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities. He was interviewed in March of 2020.

This week in....

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

> **5726 - 1965**, the Rebbe spoke at great length about the uniqueness of *chasidic* philosophy, describing how it brings a fresh understanding to every level of Torah study. Over the course of the next few months he continued to expound on these ideas. Five years later, the talks were published as a treatise titled "Kuntres Inyona shel Toras Hachasidus." This dissertation remains one of the most comprehensive overviews of *chasidic* philosophy.¹ 19 Kislev

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.

In honor of the important work of the
My Encounter with the Rebbe project.

Thank you!

By Anonymous

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