

HERE'S my STORY

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A WOUNDED PRIVATE BECOMES A HEALTHY SERGEANT

RABBI YERACHMIEL BENJAMINSON



Rabbi Benjaminson speaking at a dinner for Tzivos Hashem.

Just before Passover of 1980, the Rebbe started a new campaign to teach kids about the holiday and to get them excited about eating *matzah*, holding a *Seder*, and learning about all the related *mitzvot*.

At the time, I was a newly-married *yeshivah* student who had signed onto an earlier initiative of the Rebbe to enroll more kids in Jewish schools, and now I became part of this initiative too. Among the activities to publicize the Passover project, we printed and distributed 250,000 brochures which we headlined "Matzah Ball Contest," showcasing the prizes that could be won by kids who did the *mitzvot* associated with Passover. Along with my fellow *yeshivah* students, I stood outside schools to distribute the brochures and stuffed mailboxes in Jewish areas of New York.

It was a brilliant idea. No one had thought of doing such a thing before, but the Rebbe reasoned that if kids got involved in the *mitzvot* of Passover, they would naturally involve their friends and relatives. And there was no better way to get them interested than by holding a contest and giving away prizes.

Indeed, this project proved enormously successful — we received tens of thousands of contest entries from kids all over New York. And we heard many stories about families

that had not celebrated Passover for many years but did so this year because the kids were on fire about it. We also heard about families who had previously observed Passover in a perfunctory way, but this year did so with enthusiasm because the impetus came from the kids.

No sooner was that project over than the Rebbe had another brilliant idea — a children's organization which he called Tzivos Hashem, "The Army of G-d."

On the fifth day of Sukkot, the Rebbe held a children's rally at the Chabad Headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway, where he explained how this organization would work. Kids who joined would study Torah and do *mitzvot* and, through these activities, would advance in rank — starting out as privates and progressing to sergeants, majors, colonels and even generals, just like in the army. At certain times of the year, there would be rallies with prizes and medals awarded.

This was not just an educational activity, the Rebbe stressed. This went much deeper, for the goal of Tzivos Hashem was nothing less than to bring about the Final Redemption, which is why its motto became "We want Mashiach now!"

This organization was very important to the Rebbe and he spoke about it frequently. However, it quickly became clear that the Rebbe was dissatisfied with the direction that Tzivos Hashem was taking, largely because there was no one really in charge. A group of *yeshivah* students were investing a lot of energy into this project, but there was no overall plan or oversight.

Meanwhile, I had just finished directing a large Jewish day camp, in which 500 kids participated, and I was preparing, together with my wife, to go out into the world as the Rebbe's emissary. But before that assignment could be finalized, I got an offer to run Tzivos Hashem. At first, I was not interested, because I wanted to serve as a Chabad emissary in some far-flung place, but when I asked the Rebbe for his advice, he responded, "Give priority to what you are already involved in, especially since you are succeeding," meaning that I should continue my work with kids' projects.

So I agreed to run Tzivos Hashem for one year, expecting that once I set things in motion, it would continue on its

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

own just like the other campaigns the Rebbe had initiated — *tefillin*, *mezuzah*, candle-lighting, etc. But it didn't work out that way. I didn't stay on for a year — I stayed on for life.

Launching any major project is very difficult, especially when it comes to financing. In the case of Tzivos Hashem, it was particularly challenging because, from the start, we were extremely successful in attracting kids — we had 60,000 kids join in the first year alone — and managing such a huge enterprise involves considerable fundraising.

But we had the Rebbe's blessing and the Rebbe's involvement. Tzivos Hashem was an initiative to which the Rebbe gave top priority. Whenever a question arose, the Rebbe would respond within minutes. He was directing us, advising us and inspiring us to constantly come up with new ideas, take on new projects and add new parts to this phenomenal program.

The response was amazing, even if we did have some critics. To one such critic — a New York rabbi who thought that recruiting kids for an "army" would encourage violence — the Rebbe responded with a four-page letter (which has since been published).

The Rebbe wrote that he had thought long and hard about what American children were missing. And he realized that today's children needed to understand that they can't do whatever they want or think that this world is a free-ride. There is someone who runs the world and that someone is G-d. If you are part of Tzivos Hashem, "The Army of G-d," you understand that. You understand that you are a soldier, who has to listen to what your Commander tells you to do. If Jewish children really caught onto this idea, the Rebbe wrote, it would change the trajectory of their lives. So this is why he pushed it so much.

When people came to see the Rebbe, he would often ask if their children were members of Tzivos Hashem. And he would ask the kids: "What rank do you hold? Did you get your friends involved too?"

I remember very vividly getting a phone call in the middle of the night from Rabbi Leibel Groner, the Rebbe's secretary, telling me that a girl had been in a car accident and was in critical condition. And the Rebbe wanted her to be raised to a higher rank in Tzivos Hashem than the one she held, in order to help her get well more quickly.

I went immediately to the office and found this child's index card. (At the time, we had no computers so all the kids' names were on index cards, and we had tens of thousands of index cards.) I found it, raised her from a private to a sergeant, and she had a full recovery.

Just how much the Rebbe cared about Tzivos Hashem is evidenced by the many rallies he held for the kids — over eighty of them — at which he spoke directly to the children, on their own level. We collected all these talks and published six volumes!

Reading the transcripts of these talks, one sees that the Rebbe trusted children more than adults. He said that

Dedicated in loving memory of my dear parents

Mr. **Joseph Newfield**
Yosef Moshe ben **Pinchas Hakohen**
Yahrtzeit, 17 Shevat

Mrs. **Ruth Newfield**
Rochel bas **Shlomo Halevi**
Yahrtzeit, 22 Tammuz

By Dr. **Phillip Gordon** and Dr. **Philippa Newfield**

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children under Bar or Bat Mitzvah — for whom Tzivos Hashem was created — are pure and innocent. They mean what they say, and they do everything with their whole being. Perhaps this is why the Rebbe spent so much time with them — something that in the annals of Jewish history was never done by any other Jewish leader. But the Rebbe believed that, with their purity, these little kids were capable of actually bringing Mashiach now.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Benjaminson is the executive director of Tzivos Hashem, an international organization for Jewish children, which includes the Jewish Children's Museum and the Hachai publishing house. He was interviewed in the My Encounter studio in January of 2021.

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

> **5711 - 1951**, the Rebbe addressed a group of *yeshivah* students who were going to spend their summer vacation traveling around the US to strengthen far-flung Jewish communities. "You should know that you are carrying a great responsibility," the Rebbe said. "People will watch you ... and see that this is how someone who is a Lubavitcher *chossid*, a *yeshivah* student and a G-d fearing Jew looks. And that impression will remain with them ... But since my father-in-law the Rebbe instituted this practice, each of you can surely fulfill the mission properly."¹
22 Tammuz

1. *Torat Menachem* vol. 3 page 224

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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