

HERE'S my STORY

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"AND WHAT IS YOUR NAME?"

RABBI LEVI GARELIK



Rabbi Garelik in the late 1960s.

My parents — Rabbi Gershon Mendel and Rebbetzin Bessie Garelik — were sent to Milan, Italy, by the Rebbe over sixty years ago, before I was even born. So, I am privileged to be one of the first children born to his emissaries. And I am also one of the first people to be named Levi Yitzchok after the Rebbe's father.

When my mother brought up the idea of giving me this name, my father agreed because, as a child, he had spent time in Almaty, Kazakhstan. That was where Rabbi Levi Yitzchok was exiled by the Soviets for the crime of teaching Torah and supporting Jewish religious practice. Although my father never met Rabbi Levi Yitzchok — since even being in the vicinity of a Schneerson back then was considered a crime — he felt a connection to him. Eventually, my father and his sisters grew very close to the Rebbe's mother, Rebbetzin Chana, and they all escaped Russia together. But that is another story.

Later, when I was a toddler, my parents sent Rebbetzin Chana a framed picture of myself, and she wrote back expressing her gratitude. It apparently meant a lot to her that I was named after her husband because she put my picture on the breakfront of her dining room. And she even mentioned to others, "I have my Levi Yitzchok."

But I never got to meet Rebbetzin Chana because the first time I visited New York she had already passed away. That visit took place in the winter of 1967 when I was seven, and my mother brought me along with my five siblings to meet the Rebbe. We timed our trip to coincide with *Yud-Tet Kislev*, the 19th of Kislev, when Chabad celebrates the "Rosh Hashanah of Chasidism" because on this date in 1798, the Alter Rebbe, the founder of the Chabad Movement, was freed from Czarist prison.

The day before we left Italy for America, the Italian translation of the Alter Rebbe's seminal work, the *Tanya*, came off the press. This project was very important to the Rebbe, and he had appointed my father to make it happen. We would be bringing him the first copy, and it was decided that I should be the one to make the presentation. We would all wait outside 770 as the Rebbe left to go home in the evening, and that is when I would hand him the new Italian *Tanya*.

I will never forget the scene. We had just come from the airport and we were standing out in the street; it was already dark, as it was December. The light was shining from the window of the Rebbe's office, and we knew that when that light went off, he would be coming out shortly.

Before this, I had heard the Rebbe's voice on the recordings of his *farbrengens*, but I had never seen him. Now, finally, I did!

The Rebbe walked down the front pathway to where we were standing, and then stopped. We all recited the blessing of *Shehecheyanu* and the Rebbe responded Amen, and then I stepped forward with the Italian *Tanya*, which was not yet bound — it was just loose pages covered in plastic. The Rebbe took it from me with both hands, looked at it, and said, "Thank you!" And then he got into his car and left.

The following Shabbat, there was a *farbrengen*, and I was so excited to participate. I was given a box on which to sit right next to the Rebbe's table, and that is where I stayed through the entire event. Although I spoke Yiddish, I didn't understand much of the talks the Rebbe gave, but the part

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

I liked most was the singing — when the songs started, I felt I was in the Garden of Eden. Later, when I was older and understood more, I looked at the transcript of that talk and saw that the Rebbe said, “One of the milestones reached in honor of *Yud-Tet Kislev* was that the *Tanya* was just printed in Italian...” He spoke about the whole idea of translating *chasidic* teachings into foreign languages, and that by doing so we are actually refining these languages and preparing the world for *Mashiach*.

When the Rebbe finished speaking, I suddenly saw people pointing at me, and saying “Go, go... Go over! The Rebbe is calling you.” I looked up and saw that the Rebbe was smiling towards me, so I walked over to him and he handed me a piece of cake. I took it and sat back down on my box.

After a few weeks in New York, it was time for us to go back to Italy. We were standing together in the hallway of 770, when the Rebbe’s secretary approached us. “The Rebbe wants to see the Garelik family for a private audience right now!” he announced. We were entirely unprepared for this, but the Rebbe had summoned us, so we went in.

The Rebbe spoke to my mother for a while. Later I found out that most of the conversation was about my education, because at the time the Lubavitch school in Milan was in its infancy and most of my learning was private.

After speaking with my mother and my sister, the Rebbe turned to me and asked in Yiddish, “What is your name?”

“Levi Yitzchok,” I said.

“What are you learning?” he continued, smiling all the while.

“... *Parshat Toldot*.”

“What does *Toldot* mean?”

“It means ‘children.’”

“Whose children?”

“The children of Yitzchak.”

“And who were Yitzchak’s children?”

“Yaakov and Esav,” I answered correctly.

“And which of them was more observant?” the Rebbe continued, using the Yiddish word “*frum*” for “observant.” Now, I knew Yiddish, but I had not heard this term before. So, I turned to my mother and said in Italian, “*Non capisco quella parola* — I don’t understand that word.”

But, of course, the Rebbe spoke Italian, so he immediately rephrased himself, asking me, “Who was better?”

I knew the answer to that: “Yaakov!”

“In that case, let’s talk about Yaakov. Do you know if he had any children?”

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Sure, I knew. Yaakov’s twelve sons became the Twelve Tribes of Israel. To my luck, my uncle had given me a puzzle which had all their names, so I was hoping that the Rebbe would ask me this question, and he did.

I jumped on it, and I started reciting their names, until the Rebbe stopped me at the sixth with: “Good enough!”

But he was not done yet. “What was the name of the third one again?”

“Levi,” I answered.

“And what is your name?”

No problem answering that question.

Then the Rebbe got serious and looked me straight in the eyes. “And whom are you named after?”

Now, in Italian there is a very elegant way to say “your,” but I did not know the equivalent in Yiddish. So instead of saying, “your father,” which I felt might be disrespectful, I said, “the Rebbe’s father.”

When I said that, the Rebbe gave me a massive smile. He then called me over and gave me a prayer book, which I treasure to this day.

That was my first audience with the Rebbe when I was a small child. There were many others that followed, but this one will always stand out in my memory.

Rabbi Levi Garelik is a lecturer and author of multiple books on Jewish law. He resides in Brooklyn, New York, where he was interviewed in February of 2021.

This week in....

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

> **5749 - 1989**, Camp Gan Israel came to 770 from upstate New York. They joined the Rebbe’s *minyan*, and the Rebbe encouraged the children to sing the prayers with the unique tunes sung in camp. Before addressing the children, the Rebbe made sure someone was prepared to translate his talk to English for them to understand. He distributed coins to the children for charity and handed out dollars to the others who were present. This scene repeated itself the next day when Camp Gan Israel of Montreal came to Brooklyn, and once again on the day after that for Camp Machne Yisrael of Queens, New York. ¹
20 Av

MY ENCOUNTER
with the **REBBE**

While we have done our utmost to authenticate these stories, they reflect the narrator’s recollection and interpretation of the Rebbe’s words.

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