

# HERE'S my STORY

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## GOOD FRIENDS ONLY

RABBI MENDEL AZIMOV



Mendel Azimov and his father at the Bar Mitzvah celebration in 770.

On the 11th of Nissan, 1982, the Rebbe was turning 80. And so, of course, his *chasidim* wanted to come to New York to celebrate this milestone and to be present at the *farbrengen* that the Rebbe would hold for the occasion.

The problem was that everyone wanted to come, but not everyone could. Some *chasidim* even wrote to the Rebbe to tell him how bad they felt that they wouldn't be able to make it, either because they couldn't afford the ticket, or because Passover was just a few days later. So, a few weeks beforehand, the Rebbe announced that nobody should make a trip just for his birthday.

Restrictions like this were not new. Generally speaking, the Rebbe only gave permission for his overseas emissaries — like my parents, who were the Rebbe's emissaries in France — to visit every second year. To come any other time, they needed a special reason.

Fortunately, we had a good excuse for anyone who wondered how we still made it to New York: My Bar Mitzvah was going to be the day after the Rebbe's birthday, on the 12th of Nissan — not in Paris, but in New York. So

my parents, and all the other French *chasidim*, would not be going to New York that year in honor of the Rebbe's birthday, but in honor of Mendel Azimov's Bar Mitzvah.

It was an incredible experience. The Rebbe held a *farbrengen* on Sunday evening that went through the night, into the early hours of my Bar Mitzvah. When the *farbrengen* ended, the Rebbe announced that he wanted to thank everybody for coming, and would personally hand out a copy of the *Tanya* to everybody present. He only finished handing them out at 6 AM, and after that, I was called up to the Torah for the first time, and then we set up another *farbrengen* to celebrate my Bar Mitzvah. When we went back to France for Passover, we were filled with inspiration.

Before heading home, my family paid a visit to Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka, the Rebbe's wife. My mother had a close relationship with her, and she would sometimes be invited over when we were in New York. That year, I came along and received a blessing from the Rebbetzin for my Bar Mitzvah.

The subject of the Rebbe's birthday travel ban came up almost as soon as we arrived. "Zalman Jaffe was just here," she remarked, referring to the *chasid* from Manchester. He had also decided to come for the celebration, despite the Rebbe's objections, and was unsure whether he had made the right choice. The Rebbetzin, however, had reassured him: "Good friends," she repeated to us, were not included in the rule.

We took it to mean that we had done the right thing: Whoever didn't come to New York for the birthday, didn't come, but whoever did — could be considered a "good friend" of the Rebbe and Rebbetzin's.

A good friend knows to be there for a happy occasion, but also knows to show support during difficult times, as was the case a few years later. 1986 was a very, very hard year for Lubavitch.

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

The saga surrounded the Rebbe's library. It had belonged to the Previous Rebbe, who owned a vast collection of holy books and manuscripts that, after his passing, came into the Rebbe's possession. In 1985, it was discovered that books were beginning to disappear from the library, and that the Rebbe's nephew had been stealing them. Eventually, he contested the Rebbe's ownership over the collection, and in a deeper sense, he challenged the Rebbe himself.

Eventually, this dispute went to court. The Rebbe took the whole ordeal very much to heart. One of the ways this was obvious was in the frequency with which the Rebbe began going to the Ohel — the resting place of the Previous Rebbe.

In normal times, the Rebbe would go to the Ohel twice a month, in addition to some other special occasions. So it was very surprising when, once the court case began, the Rebbe began to go every single day. The significance of these visits cannot be understated. The Ohel is a place of great holiness, the burial place not just of the Rebbe's father-in-law, but of his Rebbe. Accordingly, he invested a lot of energy whenever he went there. First, he would immerse himself in the waters of a *mikveh*, then drive to the Queens cemetery where the Ohel was located. He spent many hours there, on his feet the entire time, before returning back to 770 for prayers, often late in the evening. Mind you, the Rebbe would fast on days he went to the Ohel, and he'd only eat something after the nighttime prayers. And then the next morning, he would do the same thing again, and again and again.

For *chasidim*, it was difficult to see all this. We were concerned for the Rebbe's health and wanted to support him in this spiritual struggle. So whatever we could do to make things easier and happier for him, we tried to do.

I was a student in the Lubavitcher *yeshivah* in London at the time. Every day of the trial, we would get up an hour-and-a-half early to recite the entire book of Psalms. We took upon ourselves to study extra Torah, especially the Rebbe's teachings, along with other additional activities. We hoped to bring the Rebbe some comfort and joy — to give him *nachas*.

Meanwhile, my father, Rabbi Shmuel Azimov, traveled from France to New York for a few days that winter of 1986. He was there for the start of the trial and found it quite distressing.

"It's not just the *chasidim* who are sitting before the judge," he would exclaim. "It's the Rebbe who has been dragged into court!"

The thought of the Rebbe being challenged in court was deeply upsetting to my father. When he came home, he decided to do something to ease the Rebbe's pain.

לחיוזוק ההתקשרות לכ"ק אדמו"ר נשיא דורנו  
ולזכות השלוחים אנ"ש והתמימים  
פאריז והסביבה

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One Saturday night in Paris, my father invited all of the *chasidim* of the city for a big get-together. At this enormous gathering, he asked everybody to commit to doing more for the Rebbe's Mitzvah campaigns: To help more people put on *tefillin*, affix a *mezuzah* on their door, light the Chanukah menorah, and other outreach activities.

Later that night, my father prepared a full report on the event. Everybody's name was listed, along with the resolutions they had made. Then he sent it to the Rebbe, by fax.

That next day was Sunday. As he always did before going to the Ohel, the Rebbe went to immerse in the *mikveh*, and then came back to 770, from where he would head out to Queens. But before he did, the Rebbe's secretary, Rabbi Binyamin Klein, handed my father's report to the Rebbe.

He read the report carefully, and then turned to Rabbi Klein: "Today, I don't need to go to the Ohel."

He didn't offer any further explanation, but all we know is that there was a sudden change of plans, and he stayed in Crown Heights that day. To everyone's surprise, the afternoon service was held at the regular time. For *chasidim* there was a big lesson to be learned: When you add good deeds and make good resolutions in Paris, it can make a difference in New York. My father later used this idea many times to illustrate how much an individual can do to help the Rebbe in his work, and to bring Moshiach closer.

*Rabbi Mendel Azimov is the regional director of Chabad of Paris. He was interviewed in October of 2016.*

## This week in....

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

> **5741-1980**, the Rebbe received a group of students who were going to travel to Casablanca, Morocco, to establish a *yeshivah*. He mentioned Morocco's rich history of Torah scholarship and encouraged the students to restore its former glory by studying Torah diligently there. Afterward, he gave each student a booklet of Torah ideas, a dollar bill to be given to charity in the US, and a 100-franc bill to be given to charity in Morocco.<sup>1</sup>  
7 Tevet

1. *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 20 page 515

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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