

HERE'S my STORY

Generously
sponsored
by the



Crain-Maling
Foundation

FROM CHILD SURVIVOR TO TEENAGE TEACHER

RABBI NISSEN MANGEL

For the first few years after the Nazi broke up Czechoslovakia, in the beginning of the Second World War, my family succeeded in avoiding deportation. In 1944, however, the SS finally caught us. At the age of ten, I was sent to Auschwitz, the youngest inmate there, and then went on to Mauthausen and several other camps. I came face to face with the notorious Dr. Josef Mengele on more than one occasion, but through tremendous miracles, I survived. My mother and sister also came home, but unfortunately, my father never did.

In 1951, my sister and I made it to Montreal as stateless persons. The only local *yeshivah* there for boys my age was Lubavitch, and that was where I ended up spending ten years.

During my first year in the *yeshivah*, I studied *chasidic* teachings, participated in the *chasidic* gatherings led by Rabbi Volf Greenglass, and began to develop a certain picture of what a Rebbe is. At the end of that year, Canada granted me permanent residence status, and so I was able to travel to New York, to the Rebbe.

The Rebbe was holding a *farbrengen* and I stood among the crowd. When he spotted me, he asked another student from Montreal who I was and then he called me up and gave me a piece of sponge cake from his table.

When it came time for my private audience, I was somewhat taken aback. Instead of asking me whether I was learning *chasidut*, or what I was doing in *yeshivah*, he asked about things I was not doing.

"Are you learning Tanach?" he asked, using the traditional term for the Hebrew Scriptures.

"No," I replied.

The Rebbe instructed me to start learning Tanach, and then inquired further: "Do you learn the Code of Jewish Law every day?"

"I learn it from time to time, and before the holidays," I answered, and the Rebbe told me to start studying it every day. Then he asked about Hebrew grammar:

"Do you learn *dikduk*?"



Again, I had to respond that I was not, and again he advised me to start learning it.

In that same audience, he also spoke to me about trying to bring other Jewish people I meet closer to Judaism.

"Your approach should be the same as the Baal Shem Tov," the Rebbe advised, referring to the founder of the *chasidic* movement. "How did he draw other Jews closer to G-d? He did not immediately tell them to do this or that. Rather he did them a favor: When he saw that someone had a problem, whether a financial issue or something else, the Baal Shem Tov tried to supply what was needed.

"Once you help someone physically, he will be much more receptive to spirituality," the Rebbe continued. "So instead of telling someone you meet about Torah and prayer, first stop, listen, befriend him. Invite him for a Shabbat meal. Then you can continue with *tefillin*, Shabbat observance, and kosher."

Discussion turned to my return trip to Montreal. I couldn't afford to travel by train, let alone by plane, so I had come by bus and planned on returning the same way.

"In that case," he told me, "you can stop along the way." He listed several cities in Upstate New York, before continuing,

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

"Wherever the bus stops, go to the local *shul*. Speak there and relay some *chasidic* teachings."

In my mind, I wondered how I, a nineteen year old *yeshivah* student, could pull off a mission like that.

"Don't worry," the Rebbe assured me, as if reading my mind. "The Lubavitch Youth Organization will arrange it for you. Somebody will pick you up at the bus stations; you just need to speak."

With that, the audience ended, and a few hours later, Rabbi Dovid Raskin of the Lubavitch Youth Organization, called to get my itinerary. He arranged for me to speak at *shuls* in Albany and Utica when people had gathered there for prayers.

Later, at another audience, the Rebbe asked whether I was teaching *chasidut* on Shabbat afternoons at any of the *shuls* in Montreal, to which I responded in the negative.

"Why not?"

"Well," I replied, "there are older students in the *yeshivah* who know much more than I do, and none of them go, so I didn't think I should either."

"Tell me Nissen," said the Rebbe. "If you see a thousand dollars on the street and nobody picks it up, you won't pick it up either?"

On my return, I started going every Shabbat to deliver a *chasidic* discourse, and continued to do so for years and years.

When I came to the Rebbe another time, he asked me whether I learned *Likkutei Torah* every week.

Likkutei Torah is a collection of *chasidic* discourses on the weekly Torah portion, by the Alter Rebbe. Since I was speaking every Shabbat, I would study one discourse well enough to deliver the main parts of it in *shul*. I took the core of the question and answer, but skipped most of the esoteric explanations that made up the body of the discourse, since it was too much for a general audience. There weren't yet other books in print from which I could gather material.

Truly, my heart was pounding when I explained all this to the Rebbe, since my teachers had always inculcated in us that when reviewing a discourse from a Rebbe, it has to be given in its entirety, as written. But the Rebbe nodded his head. "Very good," he remarked.

As an aside, it was two weeks after this audience that the Rebbe's own talks, which eventually made up the first volumes of *Likkutei Sichot*, began coming out in print. Until then, he wouldn't edit the transcripts of his talks, but after I complained about not having suitable material to say in public, the Rebbe began editing one of his talks each week for publication.

Later, he suggested that I learn through the entire *Likkutei Torah* every week, five times! "I don't mean that you should just read it," he clarified, "but that you should thoroughly know and understand every word." Although I didn't need to look up all the references to Kabbalistic texts, I was to do all this outside of official *yeshivah* hours.

In loving memory of
R' Berel Raskin

Yahrzeit, 20 Iyar, 5779

Dedicated by his wife, children, grandchildren and
great-grandchildren

לאורך ימים ושנים טובות

You can help us record more testimonies by dedicating future editions of *Here's My Story*

There were many times that I only went to sleep at three or four in the morning, after carefully learning through that week's *Likkutei Torah*. At another audience with the Rebbe later that year, when the *Likkutei Torah* of the week was over twenty pages long, he asked me how it was going.

"Rebbe," I said, "It's very difficult."

The Rebbe gave a smile: "Continue." And that was all he said.

Eventually, the Rebbe suggested that I work for him. My first task was to write references and notes on the Code of Jewish Law authored by the Alter Rebbe, and I continued to write, edit and translate various Chabad books for nearly fifty years.

I think the Rebbe saw potential in me that I myself wasn't aware of, and set out to cultivate it immediately at our first meeting. He coached me, step by step. He trained me how to start; first to speak a little bit, then every week, and eventually making a lifelong vocation of writing and teaching.

I had learned the Rebbe's teachings and heard stories beforehand, but it was only after meeting him that I saw how the Rebbe sees through you; he sees what you yourself don't realize is hidden within you.

Rabbi Nissen Mangel is an author and lecturer who serves as rabbi of congregation Ksav Sofer in Brooklyn. He was interviewed in December of 2011 and March of 2012.

This week in....

לע"נ ר' ישראל יעקב וזוגתו מרת קריינא ע"ה לאקשין
ע"י בניהם ר' נחמן ור' אברהם ומשפחתם שיחי

> **5726-1966**, Rabbi Isser Yehuda Unterman, the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, came to meet with the Rebbe and they spoke for about four hours. The Rebbe received visitors that evening from 8:20 PM until 7:00 AM and went home two hours later.
22 Iyar

> **5730-1970**, the Rebbe held an unexpected *farbrengen* between the afternoon and evening prayers at the end of Lag B'omer. After delivering a *chasidic* discourse, the Rebbe spoke at length about the urgent need for the Israeli government to recognize only *Halachic* conversions.¹
18 Iyar

1. *Torat Menachem* vol. 60 page 236

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.

Supported by members of

THE
JEM FOUNDATION

ואתה תצוה... להעלות נר תמיד