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HERE'S *my* STORY

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THE HOLY LAND OF DULUTH

RABBI NOACH BERNSTEIN

In the late '40s, I was a boy of about ten years old, living in Coney Island, and attending *yeshivah* in Brighton Beach. Like many other New Yorkers in those days, a Lubavitcher named Reb Mendel Cunin would spend his summers in Coney Island, and he attended the *shul* on 33rd street where my father served as *gabbai*. They became very friendly with each other, and one day my father told Reb Mendel that he was looking for a *yeshivah* with a more G-d fearing atmosphere for me.

"I've got just the place for you," said Reb Mendel, referring to the Chabad *yeshivah* on Bedford Avenue and Dean Street.

The *yeshivah* was in a building once home to the Brooklyn Union League Club, and had a large statue of President Grant on horseback in front. I ended up going through the whole Lubavitch educational system, eventually learning in 770.

Before I married my wife, Adela, I began serving as a rabbi of a *shul* in Brooklyn, and later came back to Coney Island, as rabbi of the Anshei Poland congregation. In addition, I went into business. At one point, I wrote to the Rebbe about a business opportunity that came up: A grocery store in Crown Heights had gone up for sale, and it was supposed to be a very good deal. The problem was that, in the '60s, people were running away from the area. There had been riots in New York, someone was killed in an apartment building, and there was an exodus. My wife was worried that there wouldn't be any customers, and she wasn't too excited by the thought of being a grocery lady either.

"You don't have to worry about customers," the Rebbe replied. "You'll have customers. About your wife not wanting a grocery business — *that* you have to worry about."

So for a time, I had a car rental company, and then I worked for the city of New York as a hospital care investigator. Then, in 1967, not long after the Six Day War, Rabbi Moshe Feller of Chabad in Minnesota came to me with a proposal. There was a *shul* in Duluth that needed a rabbi and he wanted me to take the position. I told him that my wife and I were already set up, but I let myself be convinced.

When I wrote to ask the Rebbe about it, he didn't answer yes or no. But once I made up my mind to go, he gave me many blessings. At an audience before we went to Duluth, he described the respectful nature of the people there, and said that we should transform the place spiritually, using

Rabbi Bernstein with Mayer Ben Boo of Duluth

the familiar *chasidic* expression, "*Mach doh Eretz Yisroel* — Make this place into the Land of Israel."

Knowing how far removed the people there were from Judaism — from "*Eretz Yisrael*" — I wondered how I could manage something like that. The people there were simple Jews. Their grandparents, who had emigrated from Europe, knew something. But now we were in the second and third generations, and without Jewish schools! Little had remained.

As if reading my mind, the Rebbe added: "At least bring them closer to *Eretz Yisroel*, then."

We made a Sunday school in Duluth for Jewish children and that had an influence on the whole community — some four hundred families. I went to hospitals to visit the sick, had a regular radio program, and made television specials before every holiday. I was appointed to the Minnesota Human Rights Board by Governor Harold LeVander, and to Duluth's Fair Housing and Employment Committee, by Mayor Ben Boo. There was a lot to do.

But after a year, I wasn't sure whether to remain in Duluth. I had only taken a year's leave of absence from my job in New York, and if I stayed any longer, I would have to reapply for it on my return.

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70 | 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.
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continued from reverse

"G-d is happy with you there," the Rebbe told me, "so you should continue." As a result, I stayed there for four more years, after which time I left with the Rebbe's blessing.

In 1970, there was a White House Conference on Children. As a result of the great things Lubavitch has done for education, and my position on the Human Rights Board, I received an invitation. Of the four thousand or so delegates, there were several Lubavitchers.

The Rebbe strongly approved of our participation. He wrote that it was "urgent, and extremely good," and encouraged us to work as a team and, in his words, "conquer the conference together."

The conference was divided into various forums, which discussed how best to educate children, and then came up with resolutions that were to be implemented. Every day, the Lubavitch delegates coordinated with the Rebbe's office on how to best present our views at these forums. We spoke about ethics in education; about how teachers have to be ethical and moral, people whom parents could trust to not only teach their children school subjects, but also how to be a *mensch*; and about the importance of recognizing that G-d is always watching us. A few years before, the "Regents' Prayer," a non-denominational prayer meant to be recited each day in New York schools, was stopped by the courts. So, we also advocated for allowing prayer in school, although in later years the Rebbe strongly advocated for a moment of silence instead.

Afterwards, we took a shuttle from Washington to New York, arriving in time for the Rebbe's *farbrengen* for Yud Tes Kislev. When we came in, the Rebbe motioned to me to say L'chaim. At first I was trying to figure out who he was pointing to — I didn't imagine he meant me — but he did. "*L'chaim*," I called out, "may every child be allowed to mention the Alm-ghty's name in school!"

"Is that what you declared in Washington? Do you really mean it?" asked the Rebbe.

"Yes," I confirmed.

"A very fine thing," replied the Rebbe in approval.

A lot of good things came about because of that conference, and a year later, I was invited back, by President Nixon, as a delegate to a conference on aging, and made a good impression there as well.

There was another, more tenuous connection with the White House, which went back even before all of this. While I had my car rental office in Brighton Beach, I became acquainted with an agent for a real estate developer named Fred Trump.

This agent helped my mother find an apartment, where she lived for over fifty years, in one of the large apartment buildings Trump had built in Brighton Beach. When Sukkot was approaching, I went to the office to get permission to build a *sukkah* next to her building.

"What's going to happen if someone injures themselves?" Trump asked me. "If you can get a million-dollar liability insurance, then you can put up the *sukkah*."

A deal is a deal. So I took out an insurance policy and built a beautiful *sukkah*, which quite a few Jewish people living in the building used, and Fred Trump came to take a look at it as well.

Not long after, I told all of this to the Rebbe, thinking I would get a pat on the back.

Instead, he noted that there was another apartment complex in the area with a large number of Jewish residents. "What did you do for them?" he asked.

No matter how much you think you did, the Rebbe is never satisfied; he's always thinking about other Jewish people you can assist.

Rabbi Noach Bernstein is an activist for various Jewish causes who served as vice president of the Rabbinical Alliance of America. He was interviewed in January of 2020.

This week in....

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

> **5710-1950,** After philanthropist Joseph Robinson paid off the remaining mortgage of 770, the Rebbe held a *farbrengen* in his honor. The Rebbe spoke about the great merit of buying this home for the Previous Rebbe, which is really a home for all Jewish people. When the Rebbe mentioned that Mr. Robinson had also sponsored the printing of Sdei Chemed, a Halachic encyclopedia, Mr. Robinson asked the Rebbe to share something from the newly printed books. He selected a random page from one of the volumes, and the Rebbe expounded on that topic.[1]
1 Sivan

> **5726-1966,** in response to a question posed by Rabbi Osher Abramson, a leader of the Jewish community in Sydney, Australia, the Rebbe wrote that it would be "damaging for Jewish children" to study a government-mandated curriculum called "general religious and moral education." Since the information of this course would fall under the Halachic category of idol worship, the Rebbe wrote, the local activists are obligated to take the matter to court. "When the situation is explained honestly and with the necessary assertiveness, surely the objection will be accepted." [2]
26 Iyar

1. Torat Menachem vol. 1 page 80 2. Igrot Kodesh vol. 24 page 138

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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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