

# HERE'S my STORY

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## IT ALL BEGAN WITH THIS SONG

**RABBI NAFTALI ROTH**

As a *yeshivah* student, I used to go on walks together with a friend every Shabbat afternoon, while discussing our studies. One week, we heard some people singing. We didn't recognize the song, but I felt drawn in by its soulful melody.

"Let's go see where it's coming from," I told my friend.

That's how we ended up at the "Baal HaTanya Synagogue," a small Chabad *shtiebel* in Meah Shearim, Jerusalem. There we met ten or so men, singing *chasidic* melodies, as is the Chabad custom towards the end of Shabbat. The song, I learned, was an old Chabad tune, with lyrics from Psalms (62:6-7): *Only to G-d should you hope, my soul, for my hope is from Him.*

They sang this song a few times more, before moving on to others, and I felt something tugging at my heart. We started going to that *shtiebel* at the same time each week, and whenever I walked in, the locals would start singing that song for me. This was my first exposure to Chabad. After a few weeks, the rabbi, Rabbi Shimon Yakobovitch, offered to study *Tanya* with me, and before long I began to feel like a Chabadnik.

At a certain stage, Rabbi Shimon suggested I write to the Rebbe.

"About what?" I asked.

"Tell him about the song that drew you to Chabad and ask for a blessing."

In 1954, I was just fifteen years old and I didn't dream of actually getting a response. To my astonishment, two weeks later, a letter arrived from the Rebbe, addressed to me. He wrote how pleased he was to hear that I had started learning *chasidut*, and added that I would "certainly" help others to do the same.

This letter brought me even closer, and gave me the sense that I had been handed a special mission to accomplish. I proposed to a friend that we start a *Tanya* class in a *shul* near Yeshivat Chevron, where we both studied, to be taught



by Rabbis Moshe Weber and Yehuda Reichman. From two participants, the class quickly ballooned to forty.

Alongside this new class, I also launched a night-*yeshivah* for younger students of local, non-Chabad schools. Every evening, for an hour and a half, these boys would come to review their studies in Halacha, Mishnah, or Gemara, while I ran competitions, administered tests, and distributed prizes to the participants. We also had *farbrengens*, informal gatherings with *chasidic* stories and songs, and studied basic *chasidic* discourses with the boys. This program was tremendously successful, and became popular among the students, their parents, as well as many prominent local rabbis. When I wrote about this to the Rebbe, he urged me to expand, and would later encourage bringing the program to some of the nearby, non-Charedi neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, some of my fellow students began to resent the way I had been promoting the study of *chasidut* to others, and tried torpedoing my efforts by reporting on me to the faculty. I was going to write to the Rebbe about it, but I happened to receive a letter from the Rebbe just then, with a little postscript attached. It read: "I've heard that some people have been impeding you from promoting *chasidut*. Certainly you will not be fazed by this. Keep on spreading the wellsprings, in a way that will be agreeable to all..."

*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

A back-and-forth ensued. First, the dean overseeing the students' spiritual development, the *mashgiach*, tried to stop my Shabbat afternoon visits to the Chabad *shtiebel*, insisting that I had to attend a class on Mussar — Jewish ethics — held in the *yeshivah* at that same time. I again wrote to the Rebbe, who replied with a long letter with detailed footnotes explaining why the faculty should let me continue studying *chasidut*, and suggesting that I try speaking with them again as "there must have been a misunderstanding." Indeed, I eventually realized that they wouldn't mind what I was doing if I would go about it a little more discreetly.

As for me, I was ready to leave for a Chabad *yeshivah*, but whenever I brought up the idea with the Rebbe, he would insist that I remain. He wanted me to set a good example for the other students there by continuing to "learn diligently, in accord with the study schedule of the *yeshivah*," which would in turn help to bring the teachings of *chasidut* to new circles.

In 1959, when I was nineteen, I finally was ready to travel to the Rebbe for the High Holiday period. During that period, my father informed the Rebbe that I had received rabbinical ordination, and the Rebbe said that I should try to be ordained by several additional rabbis ahead of my trip.

The day after my arrival in New York, I was informed that I had an appointment with the Rebbe that very evening.

The Rebbe was interested in hearing about my trip; about the specifics of my activities back home and who would be taking over while I was away; about the public farewell the night-*yeshivah* had put on for me and the more modest party my *yeshivah* friends made to send me off; about my relationship with the faculty — which had improved — and the ordinations I received.

In my six-page letter I handed to the Rebbe, I asked about using illustrations for teaching the Talmud; while today this is par for the course in religious schools, then it was less common. The Rebbe said that I had to use whatever would help the students understand.

Then he asked, "And what about illustrations for teaching *yirat Shamayim* — the awe of Heaven?"

The question puzzled me, so I didn't answer, but the Rebbe did: "The best way to illustrate *yirat Shamayim* is by embodying it!"

Then he had a few surprising requests for me, asking that I deliver a *pilpul* — a Talmudic lecture — at the Torah conference due to be held in 770 after the holidays, and that I go to visit various rabbis and Jewish leaders during my stay in America.

Before leaving, I asked about staying on in 770 as a regular student, the only item from my letter the Rebbe hadn't addressed. "Why speak about that now?" he replied, letting me know that we would discuss it after the holidays. In the end, I stayed for a few more months, until after Chanukah, when the Rebbe reminded me that I had "significant and holy work waiting for you in Jerusalem." I think he put off

telling me that I shouldn't remain in 770 so that I would fully appreciate the time that I was there.

My return journey was by ship, via England. On arriving in London, I saw the Chabad emissary Rabbi Nachman Sudak waiting for me with a letter from the Rebbe.

"I hope that you have safely arrived in London," it began, before asking whether I had used the opportunity to speak to Jewish passengers on the ship about *chasidic* teachings (which I had done). The Rebbe then requested that I go speak at the local *yeshivah* "without humility" about my activities in Jerusalem since that would encourage the students in London to be more active. Even while traveling, I could not take a break from my mission.

For almost his entire life, Rabbi Naftali Roth, the founder and head of the Center for Chasidic Education, has been active in Jewish education in Jerusalem, Israel. He was interviewed in his home in the summer of 2014.

## This week in....

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

> **5712-1952**, to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Previous Rebbe's release from Soviet prison, the Rebbe published the first installment of the Previous Rebbe's written account of the ordeal, which he had detailed in his journal.<sup>1</sup>  
3 Tammuz

> **5718-1958**, the Rebbe explained that on the third of Tammuz of 1927, the Previous Rebbe's prison sentence was reduced to three years of exile. (Initially, he had been sentenced to capital punishment.) On the twelve of Tammuz, even his sentence of exile was entirely commuted. Therefore, the Previous Rebbe would celebrate on the twelfth, when he was able to resume his leadership activities, which was most important to him. "But *chasidim* have to think about their Rebbe's personal life as well," the Rebbe said, "so they should also celebrate with tremendous joy on the third of Tammuz, for that is when the Previous Rebbe's life was saved ... and the festivities should continue through the twelfth."<sup>2</sup>  
3 Tammuz

1. Likkutei Dibburim vol. 4 page 1218 2. Torat Menachem vol. 23 page 103

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.

In loving memory of  
ר' שמואל נטע הכהן ע"ה  
בן יבלח"ט ישראל דוד ש'

Yahrzeit, 2 Tammuz

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