

HERE'S *my* STORY

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AU REVOIR, ALGERIA!

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RABBI YOSEF YITZCHAK PINSON



There are three countries in the North African Maghreb that, until the second half of the 20th century, were under French control: Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Morocco and Tunisia were French protectorates, but Algeria was actually considered part of France itself for about one hundred years.

In 1953, my parents were sent from France to Morocco as emissaries of the Rebbe, and from the age of three, I grew up in that region.

Six years later, the Rebbe sent other emissaries to Morocco, and dispatched my parents to Tunisia. By this time, though, Tunisia had become an independent Arab country and, for that reason, a large number of Jewish people had decided to leave. Meanwhile, Algeria had a Jewish population of close to 150,000 Jews, with no Chabad presence at all. People began to ask the Rebbe to send representatives there, but he declined, predicting that the Jews there were going to leave, since French Algeria had no future. In fact, he even told the Jewish community in France to prepare the necessary communal

infrastructure for the Jews who, he said, would soon come from Algeria.

But nobody thought that this would happen. Algeria had seen some anti-colonial fighting, but the French had made clear that they were never going to leave. The French Catholics who lived in Algeria were certain that their government wouldn't abandon them in the Arab majority country, and the Jewish community felt the same. In 1959, around the same time the Rebbe had made his prediction, Charles de Gaulle, the president of France, even traveled there and declared "long live French Algeria!"

But by the next year, de Gaulle had reversed his position, and in 1962 Algeria won its independence. By the end of that decade, almost all of the Jews had fled the country. In France they asked, "How does a rabbi in New York have such a grasp on North African politics?" It was prophetic.

Throughout all this, my parents remained in neighboring Tunisia which still had a sizable Jewish population. My father was on very good terms with the local rabbis, and as a *mikveh* specialist, he worked with them to make sure that the *mikvehs* in Morocco and Tunisia met the highest Halachic standards.

In 1965, my parents decided that we would visit the Rebbe. My father had been there a couple times since he was first sent to Morocco — interestingly, he had never seen the Rebbe before becoming an emissary — but this was my first time making the trip. It was a month before Rosh Hashanah, and although the Rebbe did not typically host any formal audiences during that time, he said that we should all come, "Not for a formal audience; just to say hello."

At the time, I had been learning in a *yeshivah* in Tunisia headed by Rabbi Meir Mazuz. Every Friday in that *yeshivah*, the boys were taught about the Jewish calendar, with a focus on the laws of the "Sanctification of the

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MY ENCOUNTER
with the REBBE

An oral history project dedicated to documenting the life of the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory. The story is one of thousands recorded in over 1,700 videotaped interviews conducted to date. 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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Month”, which use astronomy to determine the start of each month. It was quite difficult, involving complicated calculations, and we were also assigned homework on the subject.

When the Rebbe inquired about my studies, he was very interested to learn that I had been studying this subject, and asked how and why I had been learning it. He also asked me a few questions about the circumstances under which Rosh Hashanah or Rosh Chodesh would be delayed and that sort of thing.

He encouraged my sisters in their learning as well, and recommended that I try to get accepted in the local Lubavitcher *yeshivah*. Knowing that it was our first time in America, the Rebbe even suggested a sightseeing activity for us children: “I assume you will go look at the tall buildings in Manhattan.”

The Rebbe had a strong interest in old or rare Jewish books, and my father had brought a lot of them to the Rebbe. Most of them were sent separately by ship, but during that audience he presented three unique books.

One was a manuscript of the writings of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, the 16th century Kabbalist known as Ramak. It was written in the author’s lifetime, but was in pristine condition — it looked as though it had been written a short time ago. There was a very old manuscript of *Yesod Olam*, by the Spanish astronomer Rabbi Yitzchak Yisraeli, probably written in the author’s own hand. And there was a prayer book arranged according to the mystical intentions of the Arizal.

When my father handed these to him, the Rebbe stood up from his chair and started to leaf through the pages of the prayer book. It was obvious that these books were extremely important to him and he spent a long time examining them, turning the pages and seeing how things were written. When he finished, he placed them in his drawer. They were later moved to the central Chabad library.

He told my father that, in exchange, he would give him some new books from Chabad’s publishing house, and asked me to fetch the first ones for him. “Be so kind,” he said, “to bring me that set of the Alter Rebbe’s Code of Jewish Law from over there.”

I quickly went over to the bookshelf near the door, but only managed to find the first volume of the set. I brought it to the Rebbe and he gave it to my father, telling him that he would get the rest later.

At another audience a few years later, the Rebbe said that he would like to have a Tanya printed in Djerba. An island off the coast of Tunisia, Djerba has a Jewish community

that, according to tradition, has been there since the times of the Holy Temple. There are only a couple of small Jewish villages there, but they had four printing houses — every Jewish resident of the island had been a Torah scholar and many of them published the fruits of their learning. The Rebbe took out a book from Djerba and showed it to my father as an example of how the Tanya should be printed, which characters to use, and so on. Together with the recent printing of the Tanya in Australia, the Rebbe said that this printing in Djerba, and in another place, would help bring Mashiach.

The Djerba print of the Tanya was something special. They still used the old printing methods there, where each letter is made from cast lead and typeset by hand, so the Tanya was completely prepared anew.

The first proof of this Tanya was brought to the Rebbe and remained on his desk, until his secretary gave it to me at least twenty years later.

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Pinson serves as a Chabad emissary in Nice, France. He was interviewed in the My Encounter studio in November of 2021.

This week in....

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

> **5713-1953**, the Rebbe asked Rabbi Aharon Yaakov Diskin to share recollections of his father, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, at a *farbrengen* commemorating his *yahrzeit*. Rabbi Diskin was exiled by the Soviets to the same region as the Rebbe’s father, and as he described Rabbi Levi Yitzchak’s suffering, the Rebbe wept silently.¹
20 Av

> **5724-1964**, the Rebbe said that he received a \$5,000 donation from a young woman of meager means. This large sum had been owed to her for many years, and when she unexpectedly received the amount, she and her husband decided to give it all to charity. Stating that he was learning from her example, the Rebbe established a fund to lend money to teachers of Judaic studies who often get paid late and insufficiently. He named it The Levi Yitzchak Fund after his father.²
20 Av

1. *Torat Menachem* vol. 9 page 115 2. *Torat Menachem* vol. 40 page 321

In honor of our dear parents,
Mr. **Gavriel** and **Bella Rubaszkin**.

Thank you for all of the inspiration!

By your children,
Mendel and **Sheina Levin** and family.

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

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