

# HERE'S my STORY

Generously  
sponsored  
by the



Crain-Maling  
Foundation

## A DEAR EDITOR

MR. MOSHE ISHON

I was born in Poland, in 1929, into a family connected to the Belz and Dinov *chasidic* courts. When the war broke out, I was ten years old, and on the same day the Germans invaded, we were expelled into the Soviet Union, and eventually wound up in Irkutsk, deep in the frozen Siberian taiga.

One day, a young bearded man appeared at the door of our home, to propose that I join an underground *yeshiva*. My parents, who did all they could to provide their children with a Torah education, even under those trying circumstances, leapt at the opportunity. That young fellow was a Chabad *chasid*.

Eventually after the war, we emigrated to Israel in 1950. There, I became reacquainted with Chabad, attending a *Tanya* class as a young man. After my military service, I went into journalism and again encountered Chabad, when I got to know Reb Berke Wolf, who served brilliantly as the movement's spokesman in Israel.

In 1971 I visited the United States, still working as a journalist, but under the auspices of the Israeli foreign ministry, and put in a request to make a stop at Chabad headquarters.

Arriving at 770 at the appointed hour, I was informed by the Rebbe's secretary that a quarter of an hour had been set aside for my meeting. The Rebbe then received me in his room with a smile, and invited me to sit. We ended up speaking much longer than fifteen minutes.

It had been four years since the Six Day War, and the Rebbe expressed his surprise that the Israeli government was not annexing Chevron. "There are several properties in Chevron that belonged to my predecessors," he said, "and I would like the government to work towards recovering them."

I countered that, as an American citizen, the Rebbe could recover any such assets through the American government. The Rebbe, however, was emphatic: "I am a Jew, and I want the government of the Jewish people to return these possessions to the Jews — myself among them."



The Rebbe went on to speak about the Jewish right to some of the other areas that had come under Israeli control as a result of the war: "It would be a sin to waste the opportunity that the Jewish people have been presented with. We must make sure that Judea and Samaria are part of the Land of Israel." In a note of warning, he added, "If we don't do it now, we never will."

This discussion about the Jewish claim to these lands, of course, was aside from the fact that they are also vital for Israel's security. As the Rebbe regularly argued, their ownership also constitutes a question of life and death.

He urged me to make my own journalistic voice heard on this matter, especially seeing as I wrote for a newspaper that was identified with the religious Zionist Mizrahi movement. "Why do you remain silent?" he demanded in a pained voice.

In his view, the problem started with education. "The young people have to be brought up knowing that these aren't just 'territories,' but inseparable parts of the Land of Israel! If we don't take care of this, then even the parts that are presently *in our hands* will be in danger."

continued on reverse

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.



continued from reverse

In those days, the question of “Who Is a Jew?” was the subject of vociferous debate in Israel, and the Rebbe insisted that the definition of Jewishness, under the Law of Return, should follow Jewish law. At the time, the debate was seen largely as a theoretical matter, but now we know how prescient he was, as the problem has since grown tenfold.

People suggested all sorts of solutions, or claimed that there were more pressing concerns, like national observance of Shabbat, or *kashrut*. The Rebbe, however, believed that the failure to amend the Law of Return — and the integration of gentiles into the Jewish people that would follow — was an existential problem. “When a patient is sick, G-d forbid, I’ve heard of amputating an arm, or a leg,” he quipped, “but cutting off a patient’s head to save him? That I’ve never heard of!”

The failure to seriously deal with the issue of Jewish identity, explained the Rebbe, was having a terribly damaging effect on global Jewish attitudes to assimilation — including in the Soviet Union. According to reports he had been receiving, Jews who managed to emigrate to Israel had been taking along their non-Jewish spouses. He implored the Torah-observant government ministers to do all they could, urging them that it was their responsibility to leave the government if this breach was not repaired.

Rather brazenly, I put to the Rebbe a question that many Israelis would ask in response to such critiques: Why doesn’t the Rebbe come to Israel himself, so that he can exert his influence from the inside? What right, for that matter, does someone sitting in the Diaspora have to opine on what is happening in Israel?

My question didn’t seem to faze him. “Every Jew has the right, and even the obligation, to be involved with what is happening in the Land of Israel,” he replied. “By Jewish law, every Jew owns a portion of the Land of Israel, so this is a right that cannot be denied.”

For the Rebbe, there is no distinction between Jews in the Land of Israel and those outside of it. “Just as Diaspora Jews should use the contacts and means at their disposal to help Israel on the security front, so must the Jews of Israel care for the spiritual integrity of our people.”

As for moving to Israel, the Rebbe explained that he was waging a campaign for the survival of world Jewry: “As long as the struggle for world Jewry is going on, I must be here. A commander cannot flee the frontline to save himself. There are enough Torah sages directing this spiritual struggle in Israel itself.” He also emphasized the close bond that he, and Chabad, had with the Land of Israel and its inhabitants.

All told, I spent over three hours with the Rebbe that night. When I emerged from his room, I felt I had been reborn. From that moment on, I felt connected to the Rebbe, and over the years, I maintained an unbreakable bond with him,

seeking his advice on matters large and small, and receiving tens of personal letters from him.

When I moved to New York to work for the Jewish Agency in the late ‘70s, I attended many of the Rebbe’s *farbrengens*, and I had the great privilege to meet him at least another ten times.

Before returning to Israel, I was having trouble deciding between two job offers: to become editor-in-chief of the newspaper *HaTzofe* newspaper, or to serve on the board of the Jewish Agency. I decided to consult the Rebbe in person, and his answer was unequivocal: Journalism!

The Rebbe respected journalism and saw it as an important calling, believing that journalists have a duty to make their views heard. He pointed at a copy of *HaTzofe* lying on his desk, and said, “A journalist who knows his role and mission has the power to influence, change and guide public opinion.”

In my years as a journalist, I saw the great respect that the Israeli media held for the Rebbe. They didn’t see him as someone trying to impose his views on the public, but recognized how sincere his concerns were, and how close he was to every Jewish person — which is what made him so great and so unique.

*Mr. Moshe Ishon, a veteran Israeli opinion journalist, served as the editor of HaTzofe from 1981 and, after its merger with Makor Rishon, as a columnist. He was interviewed in his home in August of 2009.*

## This week in....

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

> **5715-1954**, the Rebbe wrote to a group of teachers in an effort to dissuade them from going on partial strike over delays in their salary. He explained that this was an unacceptable method of protest, because “decreasing the school hours will cause the students, innocent Jewish boys and girls, to suffer. Even if the administration committed an injustice, it does not justify punishing the students.”<sup>1</sup>  
13 Cheshvan

> **5725-1964**, the Skulener Rebbe, who had settled in Crown Heights several years earlier, came to see the Rebbe. They spoke for an hour and a half.  
12 Cheshvan

1. *Igrot Kodesh* vol. 10 page 55

לע"נ

ר' רפאל משה בן ר' יעקב מנחם מענדל הכהן

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

Supported by members of

THE  
JEM FOUNDATION

ואתה תצוה... להעלות נר תמיד