

HERE'S my STORY

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THE GOOD SENSE TO SNEAK IN

RABBI CHAIM YITZCHAK COHEN



It was the first time I had traveled to the United States. The year before, I had been involved in setting up various institutions associated with the Sadigura *chasidic* group in Israel, and in 1972 I made a fundraising trip to the US to help put them on firmer financial footing.

Although I am a Ruzhiner *chasid*, I had corresponded with the Lubavitcher Rebbe years before. As a young boy, just before my Bar Mitzvah, I took it upon myself to write to the Rebbe, and had the privilege of receiving a letter with his blessing in response. Now, the day before returning to Israel, I decided that I could not leave without seeing him. I called his secretary, Rabbi Leibel Groner, introduced myself, and explained that I want to have an audience with the Rebbe.

"You can come at 2 AM," he told me after consulting his calendar, "in six weeks."

I explained that I was going back to Israel, but he insisted there was nothing he could do: "It's completely filled up."

Still, I decided to go to 770. I arrived at ten to nine and found a line of people waiting to see the Rebbe. Rabbi Groner came over and greeted me.

When I told him who I was, he immediately recalled our conversation. I assured him that I had only come to see the Rebbe's holy face — perhaps just as the door opened between appointments. He allowed me to stand nearby, and then he was called away to his office. Just then, the Rebbe's door opened, and out came three people. This, I thought, was my chance, and I walked right into the Rebbe's room.

I extended my hand in greeting, and the Rebbe asked my name.

When I replied, he immediately asked. "Chaim Yitzchak Cohen, the community activist from Jerusalem?"

He invited me to sit, and I demurred at first: "To sit down in front of a Rebbe?" I asked in surprise. But after the third time he asked, I relented. That moment Rabbi Groner opened the door, but the Rebbe waved him away.

I hadn't prepared myself for a talk with the Rebbe, but I began by bringing up my connection with Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin, one of the most prominent rabbinic authorities in Israel, who was a Chabad *chasid*. Among his many pursuits, Rabbi Zevin would collect charity for Jerusalem's poor, and I began assisting him in this area as a teenager. Since then, I had been meeting with him regarding communal work almost every evening.

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

The Rebbe was curious to hear how I knew Rabbi Zevin and spoke highly of him. In particular, he praised the unapologetic stance he had taken on a couple of controversial Halachic issues of the day. Prime Minister Golda Meir had even exerted pressure to stop him from being appointed to the Chief Rabbinate Council over one such position he had taken. But, as the Rebbe noted with satisfaction, "he was still elected among the top ten candidates."

The Rebbe had himself vociferously protested a controversial amendment to the Law of Return, which became known as the "Who Is a Jew" issue. He warned that the integrity of the Jewish people would be compromised if the law were not worded to reflect that the only valid conversions were those conducted in accordance with traditional Jewish law. "Rabbi Zevin is fighting resolutely to have the law fixed," the Rebbe remarked, before going on to speak about the matter at length, and about how various government ministers from the religious parties were able to have the law changed, but instead, had stymied efforts to do so. It was evident from the pain in his voice that this issue affected him deeply and gave him no rest.

Although I was still in my twenties at the time, I was already deeply involved in communal matters, and had good contacts with various government, rabbinic, and community figures throughout Israel. The Rebbe apparently picked up on this, and decided to share his point of view with me, enlisting me and my influence in this cause. I was impressed by how well-informed the Rebbe was regarding the particulars of the Israeli political system; he knew every government minister and member of Knesset.

Towards the end of our discussion, the Rebbe asked about the reason for my visit. When I mentioned Sadigura, he told me about the close connection that his father-in-law, the Previous Rebbe, had had with Rabbi Avrohom Yaakov Friedman of Sadigura, and about their meeting in Vienna.

In closing, he blessed me with success. I said to him that the Rebbes of Ruzhin would bless people with

"charm and good sense," to which he responded, "I'm under the impression that you already have those."

On my way out, Rabbi Groner told me that this was the first time anyone had an audience with the Rebbe without permission. "Reb Leibel, you can scream at me if you like," I said, "but I was with the Rebbe!"

He smiled, and we parted on good terms. The next trip I made to America, I called him back to make an appointment.

"If I don't let you in through the door," Rabbi Groner said, "you'll come in through the window; I'll schedule an audience for you, but this time, you have no more than five minutes!"

A native of Jerusalem, Rabbi Chaim Yitzchak Cohen is a veteran communal activist, with close ties to many Chasidic Rebbes and prominent Torah sages in Israel. He was interviewed in his home, in 2012.

This week in....

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

> **5692-1932**, the Rebbe wrote to his father-in-law, the Previous Rebbe, questioning why "in Chabad, we don't care for miracles." The Rebbe proposed that unlike generations past, today it is necessary to dwell on such events in order to inspire people and to create a starting point for their service of G-d.¹
2 Shvat

> **5740-1980**, responding to a letter, the Rebbe expressed surprise at the implication that, as a woman, the writer "does not have to be involved in the study of Torah, G-d forbid." He went on to explain that this is "both contrary to Jewish law, as well as illogical, inasmuch as it is the wife... who largely determines the whole conduct of the home and family life." Thus, it is necessary for her to study Torah, "especially in the United States, where life is not as simple as it used to be in the old country." The Rebbe advised that she do this together with her husband, which would add a great deal of "personal gratification and fulfillment" and "cement the relationships in the family."²
2 Shvat

1. Reshimot vol. 3 page 91 2. Kfar Chabad magazine issue 1063 page 65

Dedicated in honor of the birthday of the *shliach*,
Chabad of NCI

Yehuda Gedalia ben **Betzalel Halevi Trestman**

25 Teves

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