

HERE'S my STORY

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"I GIVE YOU MY GUARANTEE"

MRS. RIVKA ZAKUTINSKY



I grew up in New Haven, Connecticut, in a non-religious home. When I was a young girl — about eight or nine years old — two Chabad rabbis came to our town and started a Hebrew Sunday school. I went, and this was how I was introduced to Chabad. After that, it was natural that I should enroll in their Hebrew Day School as well.

In 1952, when I was twelve, the school went on a trip to New York to meet the Rebbe. I remember it was *Tu B'Shvat*, the Jewish New Year for the trees, and the Rebbe spoke to us about how a human being is like a tree in the field — how a human being also has roots and branches, and seeks to produce fruit with seeds that will be spread far and wide.

From that moment, I decided that I wanted to be a teacher. I was going to spread my seeds through *Yiddishkeit*. And shortly after, I penned a letter to the Rebbe saying that, although I was only twelve, I wanted to start a Shabbos Club, *Mesibos Shabbos*, to draw in other Jewish children. I told him that there was nothing in town for Jewish children to do on Shabbos, so they typically went to the movies — for the Saturday matinee — but if there was a club, they'd be occupied with better things. To make a *Mesibos Shabbos*

I needed something like \$3 or \$4 dollars a week for refreshments — an amount that was huge to me and an amount I didn't have.

This is what I told the Rebbe.

He wrote back a lovely letter saying that he felt proud of me for wanting to do this, and he said that he would make sure his office sent me the necessary funds.

That's how the club took off. And it was a big success. I was like the pied-piper — I told stories, and taught the kids songs and blessings. The whole thing took about an hour in the middle of the day, and it broke up the Shabbos afternoon. About twenty to thirty kids came there instead of going to the movies.

I kept the club going until I graduated the Hebrew Day School and went away to New York, to the Bais Yaakov high school and seminary. In those days there was no Bais Rivkah as of yet. Once I was in New York, I would occasionally request an audience with the Rebbe, and of course, I continued to write him letters, asking for his advice and blessings.

I would like to talk about two instances where his advice — though initially I didn't want to follow it — affected me greatly.

In the first case, I wanted to leave the Bais Yaakov system and go to college. In particular I wanted to enroll in Stern College, the women's arm of Yeshiva University, in order to get teaching credentials.

So this I told the Rebbe. I said, "I need a change. I want to go to a school that is recognized in the outside world."

He said, "Stay in Bais Yaakov. It's a good school. It has a good record and a good reputation."

He must have realized that I had hard time accepting this and, after the audience, he wrote me a letter reiterating his advice. He closed with this: "I guarantee that you will never have a problem teaching."

How could I argue with a guarantee? So I followed his

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 the over 1,000 videotaped interviews conducted to date. Please share your comments and suggestions. mystory@jemediia.org

continued from reverse

advice. And, of course, he was right. And thinking back on it, had I gone to Stern and gotten a degree, I would have felt complacent. But as it was, I was always searching and learning and growing.

A short while later — in 1956 — I met my husband, and the Rebbe gave us a blessing to be married.

Now, of course, as a fully religious woman, I planned to cover my hair after I got married. But I was wrestling with how to do it. I did not want to wear a wig, a *shaitel*. I had beautiful, blond tresses and to cover that with synthetic hair seemed so fake.

Don't you know, when we came for the blessing before the wedding, the Rebbe zeroed in on that. He asked me, "After you are married, are you going to cover your hair?" I said, "Of course," and I thought I was finished. But he wasn't. "With what?" he asked.

My heart sank. I knew where he was going, so I tried to convince him of my sincerity — I explained how I had found beautiful, sophisticated hats which would cover all my hair. But he just shook his head. So then I talked about the beautiful kerchiefs which were another alternative. But he just shook his head again.

I tried to argue that there are many religious women who don't want to wear a fake wig. Even in the most religious area in Jerusalem — in Meah Shearim — women wear kerchiefs. So why can't I?

He said, "Kerchiefs fall off."

I said, "Mine won't. The Rebbe knows me! I would never go around without covering my hair!"

His answer to me was, "A *shaitel* doesn't fall off."

My final argument was that I didn't want to be an object of derision. I felt that wigs were for old ladies — for grandmothers.

In response, he said that he understood my concerns, but there was a special way that a Jewish woman should look. And if I committed to that path, then he would guarantee I would have great satisfaction in life, great *Yiddishe nachas*.

I perked up. "You guarantee it?"

He said, "Yes, I give you my guarantee."

What more could I say? He gave us his blessing, and we walked out. That was that.

I did buy a *shaitel* — a nice one that did not look obviously like a wig — and then I realized the wisdom of the Rebbe's

advice. Because what does a *shaitel* do? Well, a *shaitel* makes you blend into society, which a kerchief would not allow. Yet your hair is covered. And if someone were to find you attractive, a wig holds no allure. So a *shaitel* serves a purpose, and a very important one.

With time, I grew into my role. I realized that I was a standard bearer, that I represented other religious women. This was part of the Rebbe's *bracha* to me.

I felt that I was like a farmer, tilling the soil, planting, weeding — doing all I had to do as a Jewish woman. And the Rebbe's *bracha* was like the rain that caused my efforts to flourish. And when difficulties arose later in life, I would remind myself that I'm doing my best, and I have his *bracha* to sustain me. That's what always carried me through.

Mrs. Rivka Zakutinsky is the author of *Techinas: A Voice from the Heart*, a prayer book, and *Around Sarah's Table*, a book about the lives of Chasidic women. She and her late husband Rabbi Moshe Tzvi have served the Jewish communities in Bangor, Maine, Hartford, Connecticut and New Haven, Connecticut. She was interviewed in March of 2013.

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ע"י בניהם ר' נחמן ור' אברהם ומשפחתם שיחיו

This week in....

> **5744 — 1983**, considering the effects of what any person, especially a child, sees and looks at, the Rebbe encouraged that drawings or figures of non-Kosher animals should not be depicted or displayed before young children, rather they should be surrounded entirely by images of Kosher and holy items.¹ 20 Cheshvan

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