

HERE'S my STORY

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GAS MASK IN THE YOM KIPPUR WAR

MR. EFRAIM MOL



Although my parents originally came from Warsaw, I was born in Belgium in 1938. They had fled Poland to Brussels in the 1920s in order to escape Communism.

In the early 1940s, just after World War Two broke out and the Nazis were on the verge of entering Belgium, they tried to find safety in Switzerland, but the locals turned them over to the Gestapo, who sent them to Auschwitz, where they perished. I was spared, and wound up in a Jewish orphanage in Paris. I was 4 years old at the time.

I was adopted by non-observant French Jews who raised me as a good French citizen, but without any Torah education. In 1960, I came to Israel, to the religious kibbutz Sde Eliyahu in the Beit She'an Valley. That's when I began to live a life of Torah observance.

Some time after I arrived at Sde Eliyahu, I first heard about the *Tanya*, the seminal work of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the 18th century founder of the Chabad Movement, and I realized how much more there was to Judaism. While studying the *Tanya*, I began to see there is something deeper than Jewish identity, that there's something that has to do with the soul.

I wrote to Kfar Chabad, the Chabad enclave in Israel, and asked them to send me the lectures of the Rebbe. In 1962, tapes of the Rebbe's lectures — *farbrengens* — began to circulate amongst the Israeli Chabad *chasidim*, and they sent some tapes from Kfar Chabad to my kibbutz. I studied like this for several years, together with my wife, until we left the kibbutz and moved to Jerusalem, where I connected with Chabad — the person who helped me in particular was Rabbi Yaakov Tzirkus.

When the Six Day War began, I was recruited into the IDF, and I served as a sapper, laying and dismantling landmines. Then came the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

During the Yom Kippur War, I was stationed at Israel's southern border with Sinai. This was opposite Ismailia, the Egyptian port — literally in the land of Goshen, where our ancestors lived during the time of Moses.

I was part of the ongoing operations there, when news came in from the Chief of Staff: "The Egyptians might attack with chemical weapons, and everyone must have gas masks ready. Any soldiers with beards must shave, so that the gas mask fits tightly over the face."

I was one of three soldiers who had a beard in keeping with the Torah commandment not to shave the corners of the face with a razor. And when I heard this order I said to myself, "How can I possibly remove my beard?" It was like some terrible nightmare — I could not picture myself without a beard.

In my unit there were some religious guys from the organization, Bnei Akiva. They used a special shaver that worked like scissors, not a razor. And they said to me, "Efraim — Jewish law permits you to shave with this machine, and your life is in danger. Do it!"

I said, "Guys, a risk to life means when the danger is right before you. But in this case, they may or may not attack."

I just couldn't do it. I couldn't imagine myself doing it.

I went into the officers' tent — the company commander of our unit was there, Major Shimon Yekutieli. Though he was not religious, he liked us a lot — the three of us with beards.

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

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He saw that we never took advantage of religion in order to get out of military tasks, including on Shabbat when we had to drive in armored combat vehicles.

I said to him, "Look, I know there was an order from the Chief of Staff, but I feel that if I remove my beard, I will no longer be a soldier. I will be a wimp, a *shmatte*, a worthless rag."

I also said to him, "Have you ever heard of Samson? They cut off his hair, and he was powerless. If I remove my beard, I, too, will be powerless."

He said, "But it's an order from the Chief of Staff!"

I said, "Have you heard of the Lubavitcher Rebbe?"

"Yes, I've heard of him."

"Please let me ask him whether this constitutes a danger to life. If the Rebbe says that it does, then I and the other two guys — all three of us — will remove our beards."

He agreed.

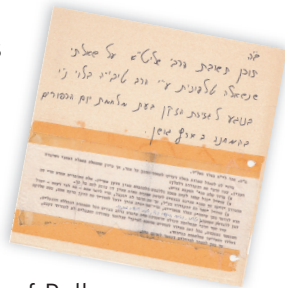
I wrote a letter to the Chabad Youth Organization, to Rabbi Yehosef Ralbag, requesting that he ask the Rebbe whether this constituted a danger to life. I sent this letter with an officer who was returning home on leave because his wife had given birth to a baby. This officer took the letter and said, "Don't worry, I'll take a taxi and bring it to Chabad in Jerusalem."

I awaited a response.

Two nights later, while I was on guard duty, the field phone rang with the message that I was to call my wife. When I reached her, my wife said: "Rabbi Tuvia Blau called that the Rebbe said that there will be no poison gas attack. Do not touch your beard."

The Rebbe also sent a written reply, which read as follows:

1. It is clear that there will be no poison gas attack.
2. The soldier may take the gas mask, put it on, and demonstrate that the beard does not obstruct it. Those who hold otherwise either lack knowledge, or haven't studied the matter in depth, because they don't consider it all that important.
3. The soldier should present the above points. If, however, these points are not accepted, then as an extra precaution, to satisfy their opinion, he may concede by carrying scissors with him and if the need arises, he can remove his beard in one minute — the same amount of time it would take to put on the gas mask — if there is an attack of the type which they fear.



P.S. During World War One, poison gas was widely used, and all the armies, including the British, used masks. Yet the Indian Sikhs, who fought in the ranks of the British, were permitted not to remove their beards, and they distinguished themselves in battle.

This should be transmitted to the soldiers, and it may be publicized immediately.

When my wife read this to me over the phone, I immediately asked her to send me three pairs of scissors — one for each of the soldiers with a beard. The next day, I went into the commander's tent, and I told him, "The Rebbe said there will be no chemical attack."

"How can he know? He's not in military intelligence, and it's a matter of life and death."

I said, "How can he know? He's a Rebbe. When you're connected to a Rebbe, he senses what is good for you and what isn't. There won't be a chemical attack. I don't want to remove my beard."

So what did the commander do? He asked the three of us to sign a letter stating that for reasons of religion and conscience, we do not want to remove our beards.

Of course, in the end, everyone saw that the Rebbe was right — there was no poison gas attack.

Mr. Efraim Mol lives with his family in Jerusalem, Israel. He was interviewed in his home in March of 2012.

לע"נ מרת קריינא בת ר' מרדכי ע"ה בקשר עם יום היהרצייט כ"ז תשרי
ולזכות בנה אברהם בן קריינא שיח' לשנת הצלחה בכל

This week in....

- > **5733 — 1972**, after a one year pause from editing his talks on Rashi's commentary on the Torah, the Rebbe notified the team of scholars that he would resume editing these talks for publication. 26 Tishrei
- > **5735 — 1974**, the Rebbe suddenly announced that he would like to give a special address for women to discuss the newly launched "Shabbos Candle Lighting campaign", encouraging all women and young girls over the age of three to light the Shabbos and Yom-Tov candles every Friday afternoon.¹ 26 Tishrei

1. Sichos Kodesh 5735 Vol. 1, p. 125

In honor of the birth of our dear son

Menachem Mendel ^{שי'}

May he grow up to be a chosid, yiras shomayim and a lamdan.

By his parents

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