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THE REBBE AND THE JOINT DISTRIBUTION COMMITTEE

MR. STANLEY ABRAMOWITZ



My name is Stanley Abramowitz. For 65 years, I've worked as a representative of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee — better known as "the Joint" — and in that capacity, I came across the work of Chabad Lubavitch.

My first collaboration with Chabad came in 1952, when I was appointed by the Joint to be in charge of its education programs in Europe and North Africa. The biggest of these programs was in Morocco, so I went to Morocco frequently over a period of more than thirty years, and that's how I got to know Chabad.

At that time, the Rebbe's emissary in Morocco was a man called Rabbi Michael Lipsker who came there and started — in a garage in Meknes — a school for boys. Then he started a school for girls and, after that, he started a *yeshiva*. The Joint provided funds for this.

Soon after him came a man by the name of Rabbi Shlomo Matusof. His task was to develop programs in Casablanca and other places in Morocco. Again the Joint provided the funds — or most of the funds — for these programs.

Rabbi Shlomo Matusof started off by organizing schools

in the many villages where the Jews lived. And they were scattered all over the country. He went to the most distant villages and helped them start a little school so the children shouldn't be in the streets but in school learning something.

There were two other organizations that were active in Morocco. One was called Alliance Israelite — this was a French organization which provided high-level secular education. Then there was Otzar Hatorah, which provided both a secular education and an intensive Jewish education. And finally, there was Chabad which concentrated more on the Jewish aspect. In every village where there was a rabbi who didn't have a program, Chabad saw to it that he was given books and a salary, and that he fulfilled his responsibility to teach.

In this way, Chabad developed schools in Casablanca, in Meknes, in Fez, and in other places. Rabbi Shlomo Matusof travelled all over Morocco to support these schools, to provide them with what they needed, and to see to it that the children who didn't come to school should come to school.

The children that Chabad took in were from the poorest villages, from the ghettos. They had missed the initial years of education, so by the age of nine or ten or eleven, they hadn't yet learned anything. Otzar Hatorah took in some of them, though not all, but Lubavitch never turned away anybody, so that any child who wanted to learn was taught. Of course, each school had a nutrition program where the children received lunch, sometimes also breakfast, sometimes even dinner, and the children found in school what they didn't have in their homes.

One thing Chabad emissaries did in Morocco that was very important — they never changed local customs. They continued the prayers in the Moroccan style. They showed respect for the people's way of life, and in turn, the name of Chabad was highly respected and its work highly appreciated.

All the Chabad emissaries who came to Morocco —
continued on reverse



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

continued from reverse

Rabbi Michael Lipsker, Rabbi Shlomo Matusof, Rabbi Saadya Liberov, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Raskin, Rabbi Shalom Edelman — felt they were on a mission, on a mission from the Rebbe.

In the 1950s, I don't recall the exact year, I myself had the privilege of meeting the Rebbe. At that time, I was the first Joint representative to meet with him, and I didn't know exactly who he was, so I didn't have any expectations. But when I met him, I was very impressed.

First of all, the Rebbe knew what the Joint did. He was also very well informed about how the Joint helped Chabad, not just in Morocco but in other places, especially in the Soviet Union, where the Joint had been active from the time of the Russian Revolution.

So the Rebbe had an appreciation of the Joint, and he expressed that appreciation. He made it clear to me that he was concerned about every Jew in the world and, particularly, he was concerned about the Jews in Muslim countries who had been neglected even before the war. The Joint didn't do anything for them; we had worked a lot in Eastern Europe but not in North Africa, and there was a real need in North Africa.

The Rebbe had a special feeling for the Sephardi Jews of North Africa. He was of the opinion that these Jews had been neglected over many years, especially between the two wars, and that we were obligated to do for them as much as we could. He himself wanted to do more.

But it is interesting that he didn't make any requests of me. He just enumerated what he thought was important to do. It wasn't a direct request, because I don't think anybody could refuse a direct request from him, but this wasn't the way the Rebbe functioned. The Rebbe was on a different level. He simply outlined what was important. His demeanor implied, "I'm not going to tell you what to do but if you're wise enough you will understand. If not, nothing more need be said."

From that first visit, I recall one discussion in particular. At that time, Chabad didn't have any secular program in their *yeshivas*, and I felt that without a secular education, the students couldn't succeed in life. But the Rebbe explained to me that because, until now, the other organizations stressed the value of secular education, Chabad had to do the opposite — to give these Jewish

kids a feeling of the value of Jewish education. I remember this discussion because I was very much hoping to persuade the Rebbe to change his mind, but there was no way of doing it.

On my second visit to the Rebbe, I brought my wife. And the first thing he said was that we should sit down, so naturally we sat down, and we began talking. I thought it would be a short visit — we would come in, ask for a blessing and leave. But the Rebbe took his time with us, and he spoke very warmly to my wife. Can you imagine another Rebbe speaking to a woman?

He asked us about ourselves, about our children and so on. He seemed very personally interested in us, and he was very human. He made us feel comfortable. He wasn't up in heaven, while we were down here on earth. He came down to earth, so to speak, to be with the people that came to see him. And I think that is why there were always so many people waiting outside his door — to be blessed by him, to be inspired by him, to be moved by his caring and his love of every Jew.

Stanley Abramowitz, who passed away in 2013 at age 93, spent most of his life working with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. He was interviewed in his home in Ramat Gan, Israel in March of 2010.

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

This week in....

- > **5713 — 1952**, in a letter to the Chabad activists of Montreal, the Rebbe expressed his satisfaction upon the founding of a local branch of *Nshei Ubnos Chabad*, the Jewish women's organization, wishing them continued blessings in their activities.¹ 24 Cheshvan
- > **5729 — 1968**, in a letter, the Rebbe congratulates Israeli president Zalman Shazar upon his seventy-ninth birthday, and encourages him to expand the Chabad area in the Old City of Jerusalem. The Rebbe also sent a copy of a volume of the teachings of the third Chabad Rebbe, the *Tzemach Tzedek*, which was in the midst of being published.² 26 Cheshvan

1. *Igros Kodesh* Vol. 7, p. 41 2. *Igros Kodesh* Vol. 26, p. 22

לע"נ
הרה"ת ר' מנחם מענדל ע"ה
בן יבלחט"א הרה"ת ר' ישראל הכהן שליט"א
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