I was born and raised in Williamsburg. When I was a little girl my father was involved with “the Malachim,” an insular chasidic group. They were extremely preoccupied with modesty: The men never looked at women. I remember one of them eating a Shabbos meal at our house, and he covered his face with a napkin so that he wouldn’t have to look at my mother.

Eventually my father left this group. I was a little girl when this happened, so I don’t know the reason, but he joined Chabad. And that’s when I discovered how differently the Rebbe related to girls and to women.

I remember one Shabbos — it would have been in 1954. The Rebbe had just completed a farbrengen — a chasidic gathering, where he would speak on Torah topics for several hours.

I was ten years old at the time, and I was standing near the door of the Rebbe’s study. As he walked out and saw me standing there. He stopped, turned to me, and asked: “Did you say L’chaim at the farbrengen?”

“I did not,” I answered.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because a girl doesn’t say L’chaim,” I said.

“Why not?” he persisted.

To this, I had no answer, so the Rebbe just smiled and continued on.

Four weeks later — it was also a Shabbos — was the next time the Rebbe held a farbrengen. At that time the farbrengens would take place in the courtyard beside 770. I was standing at the back, behind the men, when suddenly a man handed me a cup and said, “The Rebbe gave this for you; he said you should say L’chaim.” That was the Rebbe’s way: He remembered a conversation he had had a little girl in the hallway a month earlier and, between his addresses on the loftiest topics, he remembered to give her a L’chaim.

On another occasion, it was at the end of one of the major Jewish holidays. After havdala, the ceremony concluding the festival, each man would pass by the Rebbe, and the Rebbe would pour out a bit of wine from his cup, with a short blessing to each person. It was called Kos Shel Bracha. The farbrengen was held in the small synagogue on the first floor at 770, and I was in the back room, where there was a little window high up above a bookcase. I could perch there and see into the shul.

At the end of the farbrengen, my father went up to receive Kos Shel Bracha from the Rebbe. And the Rebbe asked my father if I was there. My father said I was. “Where?” the Rebbe wanted to know. My father pointed up at the window where I was sitting. And the Rebbe said, “Let her come down and get Kos Shel Bracha.” So I climbed down from the bookcase, came inside the men’s section, and the Rebbe gave me Kos Shel Bracha from his hand.

As I grew up, I realized the high regard in which the Rebbe held the women — he always treated them as individuals, seeing them as full partners with their husbands as Chabad’s emissaries in the world. I can attest to this from the many incidents that happened in my own life.

When I was engaged, I went with my mother to see Rebbetzin Chana, the Rebbe’s mother, to bring her an invitation to our wedding. While we were there, my mother
Rebbe to come out. As was the custom, the Rebbe would give the groom his prayer book and the bride would use it to pray the afternoon service on his wedding day. The Rebbe came out, handed over his prayer book, gave the groom a blessing and started to walk away. Then he turned around, pointed at me and said to the groom, “Since she is a daughter of a Kohen, you should learn an extra tractate of the Talmud before marrying her daughter.” At this point in 1984, the Rebbe had tens of thousands of followers — not hundreds, not thousands, but tens of thousands — yet he remembered this small detail about one woman, that she was a Bas Kohen.

Mrs. Yehudis Engel and her late husband, Rabbi Eliyahu Engel, served as Chabad emissaries in various locations in Canada, Australia and the United States. She was interviewed in the My Encounter studio in March, 2013.