

# HERE'S my STORY

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## "I WANT YOU TO SMILE"

**RABBI CHAIM CITRON**



I grew up in the Bronx, in a religious home. Although my parents were not affiliated with any *chasidic* group or movement, they sent me to a local Jewish day school which just happened to be operated by Chabad-Lubavitch. It was called the Bronx Lubavitch Yeshiva, and it accepted students from all walks of life.

While attending this school, I had the opportunity — when I was nine years old — to come for a Shabbaton in Crown Heights. This was my first introduction to what Chabad was all about. It was also the first time that I spent a night away from home, and I remember very vividly the dormitory experience — staying up the whole night, playing games and drinking green soda.

The Shabbaton concluded with a *Farbrengen* at the Chabad Headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway, by which time I was completely exhausted, having not slept for nearly 40 hours. The Rebbe started to speak — he was speaking Yiddish, which I understood because my parents spoke Yiddish at home — but I just couldn't stay awake. I started nodding off.

Suddenly, I felt jolted awake, and I found myself staring straight into the Rebbe's blue eyes. And he announced, "The boys from the Bronx should sing a *niggun!*"

That was my first encounter with the Rebbe.

Not long after, I switched schools and enrolled at the Chabad Yeshiva in Brooklyn. During those years, it was a custom for the *yeshiva* boys to have an audience with the Rebbe on their birthday, and I remember going in once and confiding in the Rebbe about something I had done wrong. Rabbi Yoel Kahan, my mentor in the *yeshiva*, had told me, "You can tell the Rebbe anything. If you did something wrong, tell him and he will advise you what *tikkun* you must make, how you can make it right. Ask him for advice, and he will help you."

So I did. And the Rebbe's response showed me his human side. He was so very compassionate. He didn't exactly say, "It's nothing what you did — don't worry about it", but he was very reassuring. I was just a naïve kid and that was exactly what I needed. I felt a personal connection with him at that moment — I felt understood totally.

The Rebbe understood what I needed to hear, and his reassurance and his kindness meant the world to me. Here I was pouring out all my issues to him — which, in retrospect, looking back as an adult, were not big issues. But, back then, they were big to me.

The Rebbe had that special ability to see me for who I was at that stage — with so much empathy — as he could see everyone who came to him, at whatever stage they were in their lives.

By the time my Bar Mitzvah arrived, I decided that I wanted to observe all the Chabad customs. I planned to put on Chabad *tefillin* and to pray from the *siddur* according to the *nusach Ari*.

Just before my Bar Mitzvah, I had my birthday audience with the Rebbe, and he asked me about my preparations. I answered that I had learned to chant the Torah portion

*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 1,100 videotaped interviews conducted to date. Please share your comments and suggestions. [mystory@jemedi.org](mailto:mystory@jemedi.org)

continued from reverse

of the week as well as the Haftorah. And that I also had a Talmudic *pilpul* prepared.

“What about the *maamar* — the *chasidic* discourse?” the Rebbe asked.

I didn’t know what to say. I was thinking to myself, “What *maamar*? I don’t know any *maamar*.” I had no idea that there was a Chabad custom to deliver a *maamar*. Nobody had told me.

As if reading my thoughts, the Rebbe said, “Well, if you didn’t learn any *maamar*, you can get a copy of one and just read it on the day of your Bar Mitzvah.”

So now I was thinking to myself, “Read it where? Who in my parents’ synagogue, Young Israel of the Bronx, is going to understand a *chasidic* discourse?”

And once more the Rebbe responded as if reading my thoughts, “You don’t have to do it in public. You can just give it over to a friend.”

And that is what I did.

By the time I was in the twelfth grade, I considered myself a total Lubavitcher, and I was completely immersed in *chasidic* studies. I wanted to continue, but my parents were adamant that I should go to college. That was the American dream, after all.

Because of the pressure from them, I did register at Brooklyn College, and I took the test for the state scholarship, which I was awarded. But I didn’t want to go, and I desperately tried to get an appointment with the Rebbe, so that he could convince my parents of the right path for me. But I was told that there was a six month wait — the Rebbe was that busy. Finally, I wrote a letter to the Rebbe about my situation and, shortly after, I was notified that, despite the backlog, I was to come right over with my parents.

My mother was a plain-spoken woman. She told the Rebbe, “You yourself went to college, so it must be all right.”

The Rebbe replied, “I was much older then — twenty-six already. At his age, he needs to study in *yeshiva* at least two more years.”

“But he will lose his scholarship,” my mother argued.

The Rebbe said, “Don’t worry, if he loses his scholarship, I’ll pay for his education, if need be ... if he still wants it.”

My mother reluctantly gave in. And then, all of a sudden,

the Rebbe said to her, “I want you to smile.”

His request was so unexpected that it was funny. And she couldn’t help but smile.

Then the Rebbe said, “Now that you’re smiling, you can go. I want people to be happy when they leave here.”

It was a very personal and wonderful touch.

Truth be told, my mother wasn’t happy that I opted not to go to college. But in later years, when she saw that I did just fine in life without going to college, she conceded that the path I had chosen was a good thing.

After I completed my *yeshiva* studies and received rabbinic ordination, I became a teacher — I taught at the Hebrew Academy in Seattle, and I was the educational director of the Chabad House at Berkley. Afterwards, I came to Los Angeles, where I am to this day, and where I lecture at Yeshiva Ohr Elchonon Chabad. As well, I preside over a little synagogue — Congregation Ahavas Yisroel in the La Brea area of LA.

This is how my life turned out, and for this, I have the Rebbe to thank.

*Rabbi Chaim Citron is a lecturer at Yeshiva Ohr Elchonon Chabad in Los Angeles and the rabbi of Congregation Ahavas Yisroel in the vicinity. He was interviewed in his home in September of 2011.*

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

## This week in...

> **5731-1971**, Israel’s President Zalman Shazar came to visit the Rebbe. Before descending to the main synagogue for the Megillah reading, the Rebbe presented Mr. Shazar with a Megillah in a silver case and a *siddur* as personal gifts. Afterwards, they spent over four hours alone in meeting. The next day the Rebbe sent Mishloach Manos to Shazar’s hotel room in Manhattan. Shazar sent back a gift of 18 bottles of various Israeli liqueurs to the Rebbe.<sup>1</sup>  
*13 Adar*

1. *Nasi V'chosid*, p. 321-325

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1st Yahrzeit, 10 Adar

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