

HERE'S *my* STORY

PURIM IN AMES, IOWA

RABBI SHMUEL CHEFER

In 1968, I travelled from Israel to the United States to be with the Rebbe for Purim. To visit during the month of *Tishrei* - for Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur or Sukkot - was always very difficult for me, because at the beginning of the year I had to make sure that the school, Beth Rivkah Teachers' Seminary, opened smoothly. But in the middle of the year, it was easier for me to get away.

I arrived two days before Purim and Rabbi Hodakov, the Rebbe's chief secretary, gave me these instructions: "Go to Minneapolis, meet up with Rabbi Moshe Feller, the Chabad emissary there, and together you should go to Ames, Iowa. You'll read the *Megilla* there for a group in a private home. After that, come back to New York."

I did as I was told. I travelled with Rabbi Feller to Ames, a small city in the agricultural region of the American Midwest. Back then it was something of a backward place, though it has since developed. We went to the designated address, and there I read the *Megilla* in Hebrew, while Rabbi Feller explained it in English.

Forty or fifty people showed up, and interestingly, among them were two Israeli couples - actually, two Israeli men with Christian girls. One of the other men said to me, "Listen, they are not Jewish... but both are very interested in Judaism." I responded, "Are they interested in Judaism or in Jews?"

As it turned out, most of the couples who showed up were mixed - one spouse was either not Jewish, or questionably Jewish. I was very disheartened... I had



travelled all the way from Israel to be with the Rebbe for Purim - to hear the *Megilla* with him, and to be near him. And instead, I ended up in a place like this.

The next day I returned to New York. I landed in the afternoon, and I had not yet heard the daytime *Megilla* reading. I went to my brother's home - he was living in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn - heard the *Megilla*, ate something, then rushed back to Chabad Headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway to participate in the Rebbe's *farbrengen*.

In those days, by the way, before the *farbrengen* on Purim day, the Rebbe had the custom of visiting his mother-in-law with a few select *chasidim* - a small group, by invitation only. The Rebbe would say a few words; they'd have a bite of cake, and say *l'chaim*. And then, they all would go downstairs for the *farbrengen*.

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 800 videotaped interviews conducted to date. Please share your comments and suggestions. mystory@jemediia.org

The *farbrengen* got underway, and it lasted several hours. Suddenly, in the middle of it, the Rebbe began to speak:



“There is a Jew who finds himself two thousand miles away from here, with people whom he is unsure are obligated to hear the *Megilla*, and he travelled far to read for

them. He feels dejected. He asks himself, ‘Why did I have to travel so far away, I could have been here the entire time?’”

The Rebbe was describing my feelings exactly!

He ended with the following words: “It’s possible to be two thousand miles away physically, and be right here next to me; and it’s possible to sit right here next to me, and be two thousand miles away.”

Then the Rebbe motioned to me, and he invited me to say *l’chaim* on a full cup of wine.

Of course I did, in amazement that he had read my thoughts so exactly.

Rabbi Shmuel Chefer is director of the Beth Rivkah Teachers’ Seminary in Kfar Chabad, Israel. He was interviewed in his home in March 2009.

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This week in...

- > **5685—1925**, in a description of his visit to the Rebbe Rayatz’s home, Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson notes that the Rebbe was in Leningrad, where he met with the Rebbetzin for their *shidduch*.¹ 22 Adar
- > **5727—1967**, the Rebbe addressed the first group of rabbinical students being sent as *shluchim* to Melbourne, Australia in the Rebbe’s study. The next afternoon, they were once again invited into the Rebbe’s office, where he bid them farewell and gave each of them a Tanya.² 24 Adar 1
- > **5748—1988**, in honor of Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka’s birthday, a month after her passing, the Rebbe introduces a new worldwide campaign that individuals celebrate their Jewish birthday.³ 25 Adar
- > **5752—1992**, on a Sunday, the Rebbe stood for five hours distributing dollars to be given for charity, the last such event before his stroke the next day. 26 Adar

1. Zikoron Livnei Yisrael p. 100. 2. Sichos Kodesh 5727, p. 400-403. 3. Sefer Hasichos 5748 vol. 1, p. 331. See the new JEM video, *Take to Heart*.

New Interviews

- > In his office in Jerusalem, **Isaac Herzog**, a current member of the Knesset, spoke about his 1976 visit to 770 for *Simchas Torah* with his late father, Chaim Herzog, the-then Israeli ambassador to the UN. The Rebbe instructed Chaim to speak before the UN’s General Assembly, and explain that Chevron belongs to him, as a *Levi*, since Chevron is the property of all *Levites*!

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interviews@jemedi.org | 1000encounters.com | 718-774-6000
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