

# HERE'S *my* STORY

## "GO TO JAPAN", PART I

**RABBI MARVIN TOKAYER**

The first time I met the Rebbe was as a student at *Yeshiva University*. It was a fascinating two-hour meeting where we spoke about a Jew's role in *Tikkun Olam*. The next time I saw the Rebbe was several years later, in May of 1967. During the interim, I had served as a chaplain in the U.S. Air Force, stationed in Japan. Upon my return home, I was hired as the rabbi of a community in Great Neck, New York and became engaged. Encouraged by a Chabad *chosid*, a kosher supervisor for a caterer in my neighborhood, I sent the Rebbe an invitation to my wedding.

To my shock, within a week of the Rebbe receiving the invitation, I received a telephone call that he wanted to see my fiancée and me for a *bracha*. We went with no agenda, expecting the meeting to last a few minutes.

When we came in, the Rebbe gave me big smile and said in Yiddish, "*Lange tzeit nisht gezen* – I haven't seen you in a long time! You disappeared on me."

It's true that I disappeared, but I was not a Lubavitcher *chosid*, so what contact was I supposed to have? Perhaps I should have had some contact, but it was remarkable that he noticed.

And then he said to me, "*Genug arbeten mit de maysim; yetzt darfst du arbeten mit de chaim* – Enough working with the dead; now you have to start working with the living."

At first I didn't get it. I said, "I don't do funerals."

But he only repeated it, "Enough working with the dead; now you have to start working with the living."

I looked at my fiancée. I didn't have a clue as to what the Rebbe was trying to tell me. Maybe this was some kind of mystical riddle. So I said, "Excuse me, but I don't understand. I'm embarrassed that I don't understand."

He smiled. "I read that you located a Jewish cemetery in Nagasaki. Why are you wasting your time finding Jewish



cemeteries? There are living people in Japan. There are Jews living in Japan, and they need your help."

The truth is that I did locate a Jewish cemetery in Nagasaki, where the first atom bomb fell, and found that it was not decimated. This was reported in the newspapers here in America: "Jewish Chaplain Locates a Cemetery in Nagasaki." I was very surprised that the Rebbe had read this and that he cared about the Jews of Japan.

When I was over there I was in the military, I didn't deal with civilians, so I had no connection with the Japanese Jews, who lived mostly in Tokyo, many miles from where I was stationed. But the Rebbe was telling me, "I think you should go to Japan and be the rabbi of the Jewish community there."

My fiancée did not understand Yiddish. She was an Israeli of Yemenite ancestry, and to her, Japan was the end of the world. When I translated for her what the Rebbe had said, she replied, "I think you should tell the Rebbe that we'd sooner go to the moon. We're not interested in Japan."

*continued on reverse*

MY ENCOUNTER  
with the REBBE

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I tried to change the subject, but the Rebbe seemed oblivious. No matter how I tried to steer the conversation – to our getting married or to the *bracha* we came for – the Rebbe kept zeroing in on Japan and how this was the right place for me.

Finally I asked, “Why? Why should I go to Japan?”

In response, he brought up the Peace Corps, a popular program started by the Kennedy Administration. The objective was to send young Americans to impoverished areas all over the world to help ease the plight of the people there. After completing college, many



young Jews rushed to volunteer in the Peace Corps for a year or two. They wanted to make the world a better place.

The Rebbe said this was very nice – to help your fellow human beings. “But there are Jewish people all over the world, as well, and they

also need help. There are Jewish people in Japan and they have no rabbi. Who’s going to teach their children? Who’s going to instill them with pride in being Jewish? Who’s going to tell them about Passover and Chanukah and Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur? You know the country, you were there. It’s not so strange to you. You should go there. You *have to go there*.”

I pointed out that the Rebbe sends his emissaries, his *shluchim*, all over the world. Why not send somebody there? He looked at me and said, “If I had somebody, I would send them.”

He countered every argument I presented against my going. “Don’t say that you’re married; you’re not married yet... Don’t say you have children and you need to send them to *yeshiva*; you have no children yet... You don’t have to go forever. Spend as much time as you want, but be of service to the Jewish people.”

I explained this to my fiancée, but she thought it was *meshugah* to go to Japan. She pointed out that we don’t speak Japanese and know nothing about the Jewish community over there.

And so we said thanks, but no thanks.

He stood up then and gave us a *bracha*, and I thought that was the end of it. But soon thereafter I received a telephone call from the president of the Jewish community in Japan. He was in New York and wanted to meet me for a coffee.

*To be continued...*

*Rabbi Marvin Tokayer is an author and orator. He founded the Cherry Lane Minyan synagogue in Great Neck, New York, which he led for fourteen years.*

*In appreciation of my dear wife*

**Chanchi Milecki**

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## This week in....

- > **5732—1972**, at *farbrengens* on the first two days of Pesach, the Rebbe asked two children who recently left ‘Egypt’ – the Soviet Union – to recite the Four Questions.<sup>1</sup> 15, 16 Nissan
- > **5739—1979**, the Rebbe requested of Rabbi JJ Hecht to bring him eight *kzeisim* of *moror* from the Pesach Seder held in Crown Heights for the children who were recently rescued from Iran during the Iranian Revolution.<sup>2</sup> 14 Nissan
- > **5743—1983**, at a children’s rally in 770, the Rebbe launched a campaign for children to petition the President of the United States to allow a moment of silence in all public schools, and to allocate federal funding for private religious parochial schools. The Rebbe explained that he specifically wanted children to write, because they would have a greater effect than politicians.<sup>3</sup> 18 Nissan
- > **5747—1987**, predicting an influx of Jews from Russia, the Rebbe called for a town to be built in Jerusalem to absorb the immigrants, “who will soon be allowed to leave the USSR.”<sup>4</sup> 13 Nissan

1. *Sichos Kodesh 5732, Vol. II, p. 137, 147-148.* 2. *Sichos Kodesh 5739, Vol. II, p. 758.* 3. *Toras Menachem 5743, Vol. III, p. 1298 - 1301.*  
 4. *Hisvaaduyos 5749, Vol. III, p. 91-97*

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