

HERE'S *my* STORY

"GO TO JAPAN", PART II

RABBI MARVIN TOKAYER

In Part I, the Rebbe urged Rabbi Marvin Tokayer and his fiancée to move to Japan and assist the Jews living there. Rabbi Tokayer and his fiancée respectfully declined.

Soon after my audience with the Rebbe, I received a telephone call from the president of the Jewish community in Japan. He explained that he was in New York, and wanted to meet me for a coffee.

Out of the blue, he offered me the position of rabbi of the Jewish community.

I declined, but he was back a month later. We had coffee again, he offered me the position again, and I declined again. The third time he came back, I finally agreed. My wife and I decided that maybe it would be a good idea to do this for two years. We would be together, away from it all, it would give us a chance to cement our marriage – plus we'd be near Singapore, Hong Kong and Bangkok. It would be a great vacation in the Orient.

About a year later, our household goods and books were shipped off to Japan. My wife was expecting our first child, so we decided to wait for the baby's arrival before setting off for Japan.

But then, suddenly and totally unexpectedly, my father passed away. While I was sitting *shiva*, a letter arrived from the Rebbe. The Rebbe comforted me on my loss. It meant so much to me because I was struggling with my decision, yet again, whether or not to leave. Now I was facing a new dilemma: Can I leave my mother at a time like this? I didn't know what to do.



When I got up from *shiva*, I called the Rebbe's office, and asked if I could see him. I received an appointment right away. First, I thanked him for his letter, expressing how meaningful and helpful it was, to both my mother and me. We must have read that letter a hundred times.

But then I told him I was not sure if I should still go to Japan. I was worried about my mother and concerned that there would be no *minyan* for me to say *Kaddish* every day in a foreign country.

He said, "You should go. If you are concerned about your mother, then take her along, but don't back out."

And then he advised me on how to conduct myself there. "You'll be the only rabbi in the area. And you won't be just a rabbi of the *shul*, you'll be the rabbi of the entire community, even of those Jews who don't come to *shul*. You must be open to everyone, and everyone

continued on reverse

should know that you are his or her friend. They need to know that they can come to you, and that you'll go to them if they need you. Whether they attend *shul* or not, you should be interested in them and concerned about them."

He told me to build a school and to teach a class in *Mishna*, using the actual text. "Use a text – whatever text you like, but teach via text, because then, even if they don't like what you say, they'll have the original text. If you just give a lecture, it goes in one ear and out the other, but if there's a text, that's something they can take home with them."

He also told me to study Torah with my wife – in particular *Chumash* and *Rashi*. "Study it together, and it will unite you. You'll be all alone there, far away from family and friends, and this will be quality time that you will spend together."

He told me to choose an advisor over here – someone to whom I could address questions in Jewish law, someone of authority whom I could call upon. I said that I'd like to call Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, and he said, "That's very good. I will mention your name to him and ask him to accept your calls, since you are responsible for such a large area."

And then he said to me, "*Chayei mitzvos yom yom* – Live the Torah day to day." And in that, he gave me my theme, my motto. I wrote it down on a little card and I kept it with me all the time: "Live the Torah day to day."

Those years turned out to be the best years of our lives. A whole world opened up to me – I learned a great deal about myself as a human being, as a Jew and as an American.

A fascinating two years passed and we ended up staying on for three, then four, five, and finally eight years. At first, I said we wouldn't send our children to school there. But because I had decided that I would not leave unless I had a replacement, I had no choice but to enroll them in school.

During this time I observed that the Japanese were curious about Judaism, and especially the Talmud. One day someone called and asked if he could borrow a Talmud. "I'll read it overnight and bring it back in the morning," he said. Smiling to myself, I advised him to bring a truck. Only when he came to pick up the books did he realize how many volumes there are in the Talmud.

After our conversation, he suggested that I write an introduction to the Talmud, translating its best stories and insights into Japanese, which I did. The book became a number one bestseller in Japan, selling close to a million copies. And it's still selling today; I think in its thirtieth edition.

Throughout all the years, I will never forget my meetings with the Rebbe and the expression in his eyes. They were warm and beautiful, but also penetrating. They seemed to look right through me. It's a memory that I cannot erase, and it's hard to convey to someone who never met him. You felt that this was a person you couldn't deceive. That this was not an average person, but someone with unique powers, who was as close to holiness as a human being could get...

Rabbi Marvin Tokayer served as the only a rabbi in Japan for eight years, during which time he authored a number of books about Judaism in Japanese.

This week in....

- > **5714—1954**, in a letter, the Rebbe urged Rabbi Mordechai Perlow to begin publishing *chasidic* teachings in Italian. 25 Nissan.¹
- > **5744—1984**, the Rebbe introduced the initiative of the study of Maimonides' *Yad Hachazaka* by Jews worldwide. 27 Nissan

¹. Igros Kodesh Vol. 8, p. 355.

In loving memory of my dear brother

Alan Lloyd Eckstein
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by Dennis Eckstein

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