

ב"ה

# HERE'S *my* STORY

**SPECIAL PREVIEW**

ג' תמוז, תשע"ד

*Gimmel Tamuz, 2014*

MY ENCOUNTER  
*with the* REBBE

# THE VIEW FROM 50,000 FEET

BY BRIGADIER GENERAL RAN RONEN-PECKER

Even before I commanded Tel Nof, Israel's largest Air Force base, I counted a number of Chabad *chasidim* amongst my acquaintances. Some *chabadniks* worked in the squadrons, and I met others in the flight school and on the bases, where they would come to assist and support us.

It was 1973, and Yom Kippur was approaching. Because we were on alert, about 2,500 soldiers and officers were scheduled to be on base. I wanted to give them some tradition on this holy day, so I decided to invite some of these *chasidim* to Tel Nof to help us observe it properly.

The official synagogue was at the base's edge, a small room, and it could not accommodate the many servicemen who would want to come. I asked Elisha Tirosh, an observant officer of mine, to arrange to have the services in the training hall, which was right across from the Base Commander's Office.

My guests from Kfar Chabad were given lodgings in the Officers' Quarters. They led the evening prayers, and many, many, personnel participated — soldiers, officers, pilots, mechanics and technicians.

I recall it was an emotional service — for some reason, the servicemen were all very moved.

The following morning, at 6 a.m., I received a phone call. It was Benny Peled, the Commander of Israel's Air Force. Our intelligence services had received information from a reliable source in Europe that in twelve hours we would be attacked.

We immediately went onto high alert. The siren went off and entrances to the base were sealed. We began to prepare for war.

I needed to hold immediate briefings in my office, which, as I said, was right across from the makeshift synagogue. I remember how unpleasant I felt that I couldn't join in the prayers. I imagine that the Chabad *chasidim* were thinking badly of me for this, but I couldn't tell them what was going on.

At 2:02 p.m., just as I was beginning a briefing with my senior officers, I received a Telex from the base's operations center: "We are being attacked on all fronts!" Immediately, we ran outside to our aircraft. That's how the war began for us.



Ran (R) with his son-in-law Avi Maor (L), also a fighter pilot, after a joint F-15 flight.

During the war, the airbase becomes a target, so all civilians are evacuated. Only the servicemen and the *chabadniks* remained. From that day onward, my connection with them became especially close; we built truly close friendships.

## INVITATION ON THE TARMAC

Fast forward two years to autumn of 1975. Our Air Force had taken devastating losses during the war, in both people and materiel, and we needed to rebuild quickly. A small delegation of commanders, pilots, technicians and engineers travelled to the U.S. to examine the new American F-15 fighter jet, which we wanted to obtain.

Our orders were to fly through New York to Washington for a general briefing, and from there to St. Louis, where McDonald-Douglas manufactured the F-15.

Our flight from Israel landed at JFK at 5:30 a.m. A short while later I was sitting on the shuttle at La Guardia about to depart for Washington National, when suddenly the flight attendant announced, "Is there a Mr. Pecker on board?"

I didn't move. You see, at that point Israel's enemies knew well who I was — our POW pilots had been asked about me by their Syrian and Egyptian interrogators — and I was travelling under an assumed name. Who could be searching for me under my real name?

After a minute or two, however, I decided that there was no major threat, so I walked forward and identified myself. "Who's looking for Mr. Pecker?" I asked. The flight attendant motioned outside and I looked out the open door to see three *chabadniks* standing there.

"What happened?" I asked, as I walked down the steps.

"We want to invite you to meet the Rebbe."

"It's a great honor for me, but I'm heading to Washington." I replied.

They explained that the meeting needn't be held that day. I thought about it. Many of my colleagues, fellow generals, had told me of meeting with the Rebbe on various occasions.



The communications room in 770 in the early 1970s.

"I would like to meet the Rebbe," I said. "But I have two requests. First of all, I need to speak in Hebrew. English or French won't work for me. And the only night I can meet is Saturday night."

They asked where they could reach

me, and I told them they could contact the IAF attaché in Washington.

I didn't even mention it to the attaché, because I was sure the story would end there.

On Tuesday, however, I get a call from Colonel Bareket, the air force attaché. "What are you up to here, some type of espionage?" he asks me. "I have a strange message for you. It reads: 'Approved. Saturday night. Private meeting. In Hebrew.'"

"I got the message, thank you," was all I said.

The number he gave me was that of Rabbi Binyomin Klein, the Rebbe's secretary. I called Rabbi Klein and said, "I'm coming. I'll be at the Parklawn Hotel."

### LATE NIGHT MEETING IN BROOKLYN

At eight o'clock on Saturday night, a big black Cadillac picked me up at the hotel.

I was dressed like a nice Jewish boy — light shirt, handsome *kippa* with a matching tie. At 8:45 we arrived at Chabad Headquarters — "770," a building which, until then, I had known only from pictures.

Rabbi Klein gave me a tour which I'll never forget. He showed me the communications room which broadcasted the Rebbe's talks to twenty-six countries simultaneously. He showed me the famous Lubavitch "Mitzvah Tanks," introduced me to a number of people and offered me a light refreshment. I couldn't help but be

impressed by how meticulously everything was planned and organized, with almost military precision.

At ten o'clock, Rabbi Klein called me aside and said: "Ran, please don't be offended. We need to watch out for the Rebbe's health. There's a waiting list of a thousand people from around the world, and just today a whole group of students arrived to study here for the year. To accommodate everybody and to protect the Rebbe, we've developed this system: The visitor comes with a note that spells out his request — a blessing for a Bat Mitzvah, or to get married, or to have a baby. The Rebbe reads the note, gives his blessing, and that's it. The audience lasts only a minute or two, but we simply have no choice.

"Now, we've heard about your very close relationship with Chabad *chasidim* from Kfar Chabad. We've also heard about what happened on Yom Kippur. So you'll get fifteen minutes. I just want you to understand that fifteen minutes is a lot of time nowadays..."

### ALONE WITH THE REBBE

Shortly after ten o'clock, Rabbi Klein escorted me to the Rebbe's study. He knocked on the door, I walked in, and he closed the door behind me. That was the moment I saw the Rebbe close up for the first time.

The Rebbe stood, greeted me, shook my hand, and I sat down opposite him. I studied him. He had a light complexion, clear skin, and when he laughed, he had small creases around his eyes — those penetrating eyes. This man was full of grace and dignity.

We began to talk.

First, he explained that he knew about me from the regards he had heard, but he asked me to tell him more about myself. After the personal introduction, the topic shifted to the war. He said, "Tell me about the leadership after this blow."

I told him about the problems that we had experienced. The attack on Yom Kippur and the war that followed was the first time that Israel had truly been caught off guard. Up until then, through all the wars, the young people accepted everything they were told. Now, after this shock, after we lost 2,700 soldiers, they were asking questions about the leadership. I told the Rebbe about the crisis of confidence that was going on.

He said to me, "Listen, the Yom Kippur War had bad results..."

"Look, Rabbi," I said. "From a military perspective, we succeeded. We arrived 101 kilometers from the Egyptian capital, and within 40 kilometers of the Syrian capital."

"No," he objected. "To win a war means to conquer the capitals." "Yes," I said, "but there were logistical problems..."

"What is this that General Sharon is saying, that he had no fuel?" the Rebbe asked. "He could have used the fuel



that the Egyptians had prepared for themselves!" He was referring to the fuel depots that the Egyptians had placed alongside the roads in advance of their attack. "Why did Sharon and his division stop? They should have pressed on to Cairo!"

To win a war," the Rebbe persisted, "is to conquer the capital."

## STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

After this, we spoke about the Sinai Interim Agreement, which Israel had just signed, giving up key parts of the Sinai, the oil fields at Abu Rudeis, and several other natural resources. The Rebbe criticized this very sharply:

"You don't hand away natural resources. These are assets! Oil and strategic territory you just don't give away. It is wrong."

He argued that only military commanders should determine what can and can't be returned. The politicians don't understand security matters as well and, therefore, they have no right to decide what land to return. They are not the ones who will have to fight for it again.

Personally, I disagreed with him, because I felt that the civilian leadership must make these decisions, but he felt that military leaders have a more realistic grasp of the situation; they do the fighting, they win the battles, and they suffer the consequences. He criticized the treaty very strongly. He just couldn't get over the fact that we made concessions which were unnecessary and unjustified. "Have you ever heard anything like this?" he asked. "A country is victorious, and it proposes that its enemies take the territories back?"

The whole thing was very surprising to me: How is this rabbi, obviously a Torah scholar, familiar with so many topics, and comfortable to converse in them? I had known that he was also an engineer — but still, in the two and a half hours I spent with the Rebbe, I was taken aback by how well-informed he was about current events.

I had not been expecting to sit with a Torah giant discussing, tactically, why Sharon didn't use the Egyptian fuel, or the strategic value of the air force in a complex war, or whether military families should live inside the bases, and its effect on preparedness...

## CONFLUENCE OF TRAGEDIES

Our conversation continued and we covered other areas — training the next generation of leaders, the fighter planes we had come to test, the place of faith in defending Israel. At one point, the Rebbe suggested that I begin putting on *tefillin*.

I said: "I'm not a religious man, but I am a great believer. I believe in the power of the Almighty, I believe in our right to this Land. I believe friends — even those who flew with me and did not return — still exist, and so on. But

for me, *tefillin* do not mean very much.

He asked me: "Do you not believe in G-d?"

"Let me tell you about G-d," I responded, and I told him about my friend since childhood, Elazar 'Zurik' Lev.

We flew Spitfires together in our early air force days — and then Meteors, then the Ouragans, Mystères, and eventually, Mirages.

During the Yom Kippur War, Zurik was the Commander of Ramat David Airbase, while I commanded Tel Nof. On the third day of the war, Monday, October 8, Zurik and I were sitting together in the office of Benny Peled, Commander of the Air Force, talking about the attacks we were encountering. We were under tremendous pressure at that time. A few days later, on Friday morning at 8 o'clock, Zurik was piloting his Skyhawk, flying home in formation, after an attack near Port Said, and he was shot down over the Mediterranean. Our pilots flying nearby saw his plane crash into the sea. His body was never found.



Ran's friend Elazar "Zurik," Lev,  
Commander of  
Ramat David Airbase.

Zurik's son, Udi, was the same age as my son Zohar, and he moved in with us.

The two boys were both approaching Bar Mitzvah and, after school, they would study their *haftarahs* together with the rabbi of my base. On Friday, a day before my meeting with the Rebbe, my wife called me in Washington and told me, "A terrible tragedy happened." My mind started to race. What could have happened? Did two Phantoms collide above the base?

"Udi died of asthma in his mother's arms."

Zurik's wife, Tali, had suffered so much. First she lost her husband; then her son-in-law, Yoram — also a fighter pilot, a captain — was killed three weeks after he married her daughter; and now she lost Udi.

I told all this to the Rebbe and I asked, "Rabbi, why doesn't G-d divide up the suffering?"

The Rebbe was silent, and then he replied: "We are mere mortals. How can we understand G-d's ways?" A long and beautiful discussion ensued on this topic.

## GLOBAL REACH

At this point, the atmosphere in the room was warm and pleasant, so I gathered some courage and said, "Rabbi, may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly," he replied, smiling.

"You asked about leadership, and I told you about our

problems. As a leader with such influence on the Jewish community across the world, why don't you come help us? Why don't you move to Israel?"

The Rebbe's expression changed, and for the first time in our conversation, he seemed upset. He fell silent, and didn't speak for more than a minute, which is a long time when you're sitting there — not a comfortable feeling.

I remember thinking: "Now he's going to tell me to get out of here!"

Finally, he asked how this was relevant to anything we had been talking about. When I clarified that the answer was important to me personally, he softened a bit and explained to me that, in Israel, his ability to influence the Jewish world would be greatly diminished.

"We're now sitting in New York," he said. "This is the center of the world.

Imagine if we were sitting in Jerusalem instead — I couldn't even dial Moscow." Remember, this was 1975. "From here, I can be in contact with every Jewish community across the globe."

## A SLEEPLESS NIGHT

I saw the door open a crack. I glanced at my watch and saw that an hour-and-a-half had passed. Rabbi Klein was glancing inside to see that everything was okay.

I asked the Rebbe if he was tired. He replied in the negative, adding that if I was not too tired he'd like to ask me some more questions. And our conversation went on.

After about two hours and twenty minutes, some kind of buzzer suddenly sounded. The Rebbe did not move. I had noticed that throughout our entire conversation, he didn't look at the clock, nor even look away from me, even once.

"Rabbi," I said, "I saw the line outside, and the secretary keeps peeking in..."

It was 12:30 a.m.

"Yes, true," he said. He stood up, so I also rose.

He escorted me to the door, and when he opened it, Rabbi Klein was standing there. I can't forget the scene: the entire waiting room was full of those students whom Rabbi Klein told me had just arrived to study for the year, all waiting for my fifteen minute meeting with the Rebbe to conclude.

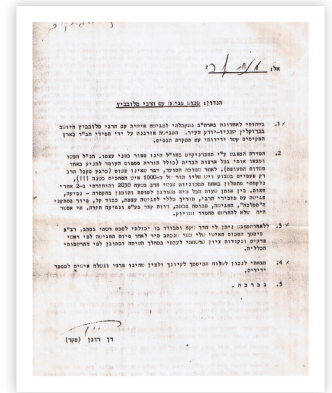
The Rebbe shook my hand and said, "Any time you're in America, you have an open invitation." In fact, I did visit him another time, and that was also a very interesting meeting.

As Rabbi Klein led me out, the crowd opened up, and I remember the looks on their faces. I imagined they were thinking: "We're studying here all year and we see the Rebbe for a minute or two, if at all, and here comes this heretic from Kfar Vitkin and sits with the Rebbe for

almost two-and-a-half hours." It was just beyond them.

I was given a quiet room, and I sat down to set down some notes while the conversation was still fresh in my memory. I sat there for over an hour, and I wrote some ten or twelve pages. When I got back to Israel, I composed a memorandum to my colleagues summing up my experience.

I'm not a religious person, but when I got back to the hotel that morning, I couldn't fall asleep. It was such a great experience, an awesome spiritual experience.



Ran's memo to his IAF colleagues, detailing his audience with the Rebbe.

## THE REBBE'S OFFICERS

After my audience with the Rebbe, something very interesting began to occur.

Wherever I would be, the *chabadniks* would find me and visit me. Later on, I lived in Boston for two and a half years, and in each of my positions and homes in Israel they'd come over. They'd bring me *mishloach manot* for Purim, *matzah* for Passover, *mezuzot* for my doors.

When I'd land in Los Angeles, they'd be waiting there with a pair of *tefillin*, and I'd say the *Shema* with these members of the Rebbe's army.

## A SUPREME COMPLIMENT

In 1977, two years after that meeting with the Rebbe, Prime Minister Menachem Begin visited Tel Nof.

He walked into the big theater there, and some 700 high-ranking officers — all command level — were waiting. As the Base Commander, it was my responsibility to welcome the Prime Minister to the base and introduce him.

Begin came up on stage and, after the applause died down, he began with these words:

"I've just returned from the United States, where I had a very moving meeting with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. But I can tell you this: Only one person spent more time with him than I did — and that is your Commander."

*Brigadier General Ran Ronen-Pecker served in Israel's Air Force for twenty-seven years. Flying in almost all her wars, he became one of Israel's most decorated fighter pilots, credited with eight enemy kills. Before taking command of the Tel Nof Airbase in 1973, he was squadron commander, then commander of the IAF flight school. He was interviewed in his home in 2009.*

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For the past fourteen years, the **MY ENCOUNTER WITH THE REBBE** project has been documenting the unknown and untold stories of our dear Rebbe זי"ע.

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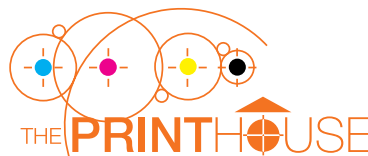
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