

# HERE'S *my* STORY

## THE STORY BEHIND TOFUTTI

**MR. DAVID MINTZ**

In the late 1970s, I asked the Rebbe for a *bracha* to open a kosher restaurant, Mintz's Buffet, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. At the time there was nothing *glatt kosher* there. They only had "kosher style." The only real kosher place was Meal Mart on the West Side, and aside from that, there was nowhere an observant Jew could eat.

The Rebbe gave me a beautiful *bracha*. He emphasized that I would succeed if I was very careful with the kosher products I used.

When I first opened and people saw the *glatt kosher* sign and then saw that I was wearing a *kippa*, they said, "Young man, you're wasting your time and money in this place. You belong on the Lower East Side." But I said, "I appreciate your interest and advice but the success of the business depends on G-d."

The restaurant became a huge success. I did a lot of take-out and a lot of catering. People would often ask me for ice cream, to which I would reply, "The food is *fleishig*, so in the same meal we can't have ice cream." They said, "Okay, then we'll buy our own ice cream."

That's when the seeds were planted in my head. I started to do research and finally decided to make non-dairy *parve* ice cream which I could sell with a *fleishig* meal. I read an article about tofu. I didn't even know what tofu was at the time, and I went to Chinatown to buy it.

I started experimenting with it but at first I had little success and whatever I made, I had to throw out. During this time, whenever I met with the Rebbe I would mention what I was doing, and he would say to me, "You have to have faith. If you have faith in G-d, you can do wonders." So I kept trying.

Meanwhile, my restaurant business expanded. I now had a Mintz's Buffet on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue in Manhattan and another one in Flatbush, Brooklyn. And then an opportunity came up to open on Madison Avenue. I asked the Rebbe if I should do it,



and his answer was "Be careful." I didn't understand what that meant. It was Madison Avenue and it was such an opportunity. I opened there, but I was not successful. The local clientele was wrong for my sort of business. And then my 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue restaurant had to close because Donald Trump bought out the whole square block and razed all the buildings.

That is when Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, founder of the Lincoln Square Synagogue on the Upper West Side, came to me. He said, "I understand that you have to leave your location because of Donald Trump. Why don't you come to us - we want you here on the West Side. Open up a Mintz's Buffet and we will support you totally. My whole congregation will come to you."

I was very excited about that, especially when a friend of Rabbi Riskin found me the perfect location at 72<sup>nd</sup> and Broadway. What an opportunity!

As always, I asked the Rebbe's advice and I immediately got an answer. It was the same day, a few hours later, that the Rebbe's secretary, Rabbi Leibel Groner called up, and he said, "Listen

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carefully. Get a pencil and paper and write it down. This is very important."

I was very excited. This was the answer I was waiting for.

Then he dictated to me, "The Rebbe says, 'Absolutely not. B'Shum oifem nisht. Absolutely not. B'Shum oifem nisht.'" Twice he said that.



I was taken aback. I said, "Why is the Rebbe saying absolutely not?"

Rabbi Groner said, "The Rebbe says you should continue with your experiments with the *parve*

ice cream and G-d will help you to be very successful. And your products will become so popular and so in demand that they'll be sold all over the world."

It sounded like a fantasy. Meanwhile, I felt like I was losing a golden opportunity at 72<sup>nd</sup> and Broadway...

But I listened to the Rebbe. For me it was not even an option. Somebody else seized that opportunity and it proved nothing but trouble - trouble with the building department, trouble with the health department - the man never really managed to open up despite the enormous expenses that went into it.

I decided to go into experimentation full time. I sold the Brooklyn restaurant because the neighborhood had changed and I committed to making this *parve* ice cream from tofu - first I called it Tofu Time, and later Tofutti.

By 1981 I was distributing samples. Then I got my first break. There was a health food store in Manhattan called Health Nuts and the owner called me. He said, "I heard people talking about a product you are making - tofu ice cream. I'd like to try it."

I brought him a five-gallon pail. No sooner had I returned from Manhattan to Brooklyn, there was a call from this guy from Health Nuts: "Mr. Mintz, Mr. Mintz, you've got to bring me more. Please bring me more."

He was my first big customer and then came Zabar's, the epitome of gourmet shops in New York. After that Bloomingdale's called. They ended up giving it out as people came into the store and selling it in their cafeteria.

Now I knew I couldn't make enough of the stuff in the small place where I was working. I had to go commercial - to take it to the next level.

Again, I went to the Rebbe and I said, "Please give me a *bracha*. I found a factory that wants to make it." The Rebbe said, "It will be difficult in the beginning, but you have to have faith in G-d."

And it was difficult. In my lab in Brooklyn we made the stuff in little kettles. In the factory, the pots were a hundred or two hundred gallons. I had to reformulate. But I succeeded and Tofutti took off. Eventually, we were producing almost ten thousand gallons of Tofutti a week in cooperation with Wells Farms.

At this time, the Rebbe told me, "People will come and they'll offer you all kinds of money. Don't be swayed by their offers and be very careful. Just keep on doing what you are doing."

When that did happen, I followed his advice. But after a time I asked him if I should take the company public. It was a privately held company and I thought it would be profitable to have it traded on the stock exchange. The Rebbe's response was: "That's a very good thought."

And that's what I did. This move put Tofutti on the map, so that we were working with the largest companies like Haagen Dazs and others. And it was all because the Rebbe gave me a blessing that I should be successful, and because his guidance saved me each and every time.

*David Mintz, a New York restaurateur, is the founder of the Tofutti company, makers of non-dairy ice cream. He was interviewed in his home in Alpine, New Jersey in February, 2007.*

לע"נ ר' ישראל יעקב זוגותו מרת קריינא ע"ה לאקשין  
ע"י בניהם ר' נחמן ור' אברהם ומשפחתם שיחיו

## This week in...

- > **5744—1984**, in a letter to those attending the celebration of the completion of Jerusalem Talmud, the Rebbe discussed the theme of *Ahavas Yisroel* and the unity between Jews. The letter also contained a short Talmudic dissertation (*hadron*) on the Jerusalem Talmud. The letter was read at the celebration in Boro Park by Rabbi Mordechai Mentlik, the Rosh Yeshiva of 770.<sup>1</sup> 7 Iyar

<sup>1</sup> Likkutei Sichos vol. 24, p. 369.

In honor of my dear parents  
Chana and Effy Hamatian

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