

# HERE'S *my* STORY

## LIFE'S MISSION AS AN EDUCATOR

**RABBI YOSSI NEMES**



**M**y mother was raised in a Chabad Lubavitch family in the suburb of Moscow. When the war between Russia and Germany broke out in 1941, she was six years old and her family fled to Samarkand where, after three years, she lost her mother. So life was very hard for her, as it was for her entire family.

Basically, her education was interrupted at a very young age and she wasn't able to resume her schooling until 1949 when the family finally made it out of Russia and came to Kfar Chabad, Israel. By then she was already 13 years old, and she threw herself into her studies to make up for lost time.

She always had this tremendous desire to learn — both religious and secular subjects — but she had no opportunity due to the upheaval. So now she was putting her all into it and excelling in her studies. By age 19, she was already prepared to start teaching in the Reshet Chabad public school system in Israel, and she received the Rebbe's approval for this move.

At that point, it was clear that her life's mission was going to be education — and that's exactly what happened. She ended up teaching for 52 years until she passed away, and she raised two generations of students.

Once she married my father in 1957 and came to the United States, she taught in Beis Rivkah, Beis Yaacov, Machon Yaacov, and in various other schools. Her specialty was Hebrew grammar, which is a dry subject, one which even the best students don't get excited about. But my mother had a special talent of making her students love learning the laws of grammar. And they never forgot what Mrs. Zelda Nemes taught them.

The stories that I wanted to share are ones I heard from my mother about the Rebbe's approach to education and how he encouraged my mother to fulfill her life's mission with total dedication.

The first story dates back to 1955, to when my mother had finished her first year of teaching in the Reshet school system in Israel. During the summer vacation, she went to visit her sister who was living in Antwerp. While there, she had written to the Rebbe that she was planning to stay with her sister until after the opening of the upcoming school year. She said she had the permission of the principal of her school to start work late.

The Rebbe's response — and I have a copy of the letter — was worded in the strongest of terms. He wrote that "as an educator, you have to know how hard it will be on your students because you, their primary teacher, won't be with them from the beginning of the school year. Although you have permission from the principal, that permission should not have been given — for something like this, one must obtain permission from the whole directorate."

And then the Rebbe added, "If you listen to my advice, as soon as you get this letter, you should get on a boat back to Israel. And if you can't get a boat ticket, you should get on a plane, so you can be there for the opening of the school year."

It was unusually strong language to use to a twenty-year-old girl, but it left no room for doubt that her life's mission was to be an educator, and this is the type of dedication

*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 900 videotaped interviews conducted to date. Please share your comments and suggestions. [mystory@jemedi.org](mailto:mystory@jemedi.org)*

continued from reverse

and commitment that an educator needs to have. My mother took the Rebbe's words to heart, and during all the years that she taught, she went out of her way — even when she wasn't feeling well — not to miss even one day of school.

The next episode, which is related to this, happened in the late 1960s, when I was a small child.

At that time my mother really wanted to go to college. As I mentioned earlier, she felt she missed so much schooling. She was definitely a gifted student and she always wanted to learn more. She even had my great uncle, Rabbi Abba Pliskin, come once a week and learn Talmud and *chasidic* teachings with her. But she also wanted to go to college.



My father was not too excited about this idea, and they were discussing it back and forth between

them. In the end, they both agreed to ask the Rebbe. So my mother wrote a letter to the Rebbe explaining her reasons for going to college. And the Rebbe — despite that fact that he was known to discourage college studies for religious people — agreed that she should go, but on one condition: she had to keep on teaching full time.

My mother had wanted to go to college full time and to continue teaching part time, but now she reversed her plan. It took her eight years instead of four to get her college degree, taking classes at night, but she graduated with honors.

When she did, she wrote to the Rebbe that she wanted to continue with graduate school and that she wanted to become a lawyer. My mother was very intelligent and she loved debating, so law appealed to her.

The Rebbe wrote back; "How will a law degree help you in your main responsibility of being an educator?" And he suggested that she choose a field of study that would benefit her in her role as a teacher. So she wrote back to the Rebbe that, in that case, she wanted to pursue a graduate degree in psychology. And to this the Rebbe agreed, because psychology would help her be a better educator.

The last story that I want to relate dates to the late 1970s, when I was about ten years old.

My mother had asked the Rebbe for a blessing to go to her niece's wedding in Israel and to visit the resting place of her father — Reb Moshe Zalman Kaminetsky — on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.

And the Rebbe wrote back that if she finds a competent substitute to take over teaching all her classes, then he would give her a blessing to go to Israel.

My mother set to work finding a substitute and she found a teacher to cover for her. But, although this teacher had a lot of experience and was a good educator, she did not have much experience teaching Hebrew grammar. Still, my mother wrote to the Rebbe that she found a competent substitute.

The Rebbe answered, "Are you fully comfortable with this teacher going into your classroom?"

My mother could not honestly say yes, so she went out looking for someone else. And finally she found a substitute who was an expert in the subjects that she taught. And then the Rebbe gave her a blessing to go to Israel for ten days.

From these episodes we clearly see how the Rebbe valued education, and his view on what it means to be an educator in general. He encouraged my mother, in particular, and she always felt that she was a better teacher because of his guidance and direction.

*Rabbi Yossi Nemes is director of Chabad Center of Metairie in New Orleans. He was interviewed in the My Encounter studio in New York in May of 2014.*

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

## This week in....

> **5721 — 1961**, a charter flight organized by Mr. Zalmon Jaffe of Manchester England, arrived in New York at 2 a.m. carrying guests from across England coming to visit the Rebbe, many for the first time. The Rebbe entered the main synagogue at 770 at 3 a.m. and held a special *Farbrengen* to greet the guests. *21 Tammuz*

לעילוי נשמת

יענטא בת שמואל (מינקאוויטש) לייט

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