

HERE'S my STORY

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THE ALGEMEINER JOURNAL

MRS. TZIVIA JACOBSON



My husband — Gershon Jacobson — was the founder, publisher and editor of the Yiddish newspaper, the *Algemeiner Journal*. The story I would like to tell is how this newspaper came into being, and the role the Rebbe played in its creation and content.

In 1971, my husband was working as the city editor of *Der Tog Morgen Journal*, a privately-owned Yiddish daily paper. And then one day he came to work and the door was locked. There was no explanation, just a sign: CLOSED.

Gershon tried to call the owner, but got no answer. Meanwhile, the writers were asking what was going on. Finally, they determined that the owner had been losing money on the paper and just decided to close it. Now they were all out of a job.

Most of the workers at *Der Tog Morgen Journal* were elderly — in their 70s and 80s. They were semi-retired, while Gershon was only 37 with a growing family to support. And so he had to do something immediately to

generate income.

As he looked for an appropriate position — picking up odd writing jobs here and there — it was becoming very apparent that the closing of *Der Tog Morgen Journal* had had a serious impact on the Yiddish-reading religious public. They had no alternative paper, since the only other Yiddish news journal of consequence was socialist and anti-religious. They had no place for their announcements or for the news of their community.

In short, *Der Tog Morgen Journal* had to be replaced. My son, Simon, remembers that the Rebbe was very adamant about that.

Various investors were approached and they decided that it was worth starting a new Yiddish paper — not a daily, because that was sure to lose money, but a weekly. The investors were willing to underwrite it for six months, so that's how long Gershon had to make it succeed.

He was starting with a serious handicap because the owner of *Der Tog Morgen Journal* had sold the subscription list as well as the newspaper's name to someone else, so there was no readership base, nor name recognition which would have helped in recapturing the former readers and gaining their trust right away.

Of course, Gershon discussed all these problems with the Rebbe. And he asked the Rebbe's advice on how the paper should be run and what its focus should be. Gershon had his own ideas, but, of course, he wouldn't do anything without consulting the Rebbe.

His first question was what to call the paper. He wanted everyone who went to the newsstand to recognize this newspaper as trustworthy and buy it right away. But what name would convey all that in a word or two?

The Rebbe said: *Algemeiner Journal*.

Now today, because we are used to it, *Algemeiner Journal*

continued on reverse

MY ENCOUNTER
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An oral history project dedicated to documenting the life of the Rebbe, Rabbi Manachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory. The story is one of thousands recorded in over 1200 videotaped interviews conducted to date. These stories are based on the recollection of the individuals recounting them. Please share any corrections, comments and suggestions. mystory@jemedial.org

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sounds so natural, so normal. At the time though, it sounded strange — *algemein* means “general,” or “for everybody,” so literally, the newspaper was called *Everyone’s Journal*. But the Rebbe explained that this would immediately convey to the reader that it was for him.

Furthermore, the Rebbe said that the paper should not be connected with any group or institution, including Chabad. He wanted the newspaper totally independent, where anybody could write anything they wanted. This was something which Gershon also very much wanted — that it should give expression to a variety of voices and opinions.

As it turned out, Gershon would write a regular column called *Mein Meinung* — his opinion piece. But if somebody wanted to write the exact opposite of Gershon’s opinion he printed that also. And sometimes people actually attacked him, yet he printed everything. That was the beauty of the *Algemeiner Journal*. As a result, he attracted a variety of readers to the paper, not only religious readers.

The first issue of the *Algemeiner Journal* came out on the newsstands on February 25, 1972. And it completely sold out. There wasn’t a paper left anywhere in the city — people were fighting over the last copy. Those who couldn’t get it were begging to borrow it.

That first issue was the most amazing success. As was the second. Within a few months, the *Algemeiner Journal* really took off. It doubled its circulation on the newsstands, and it became a beacon of Jewish life.

It was not a Chabad paper, even when Gershon made sure that whatever issues concerned the Rebbe became the focus of at least some of the articles. For example, issues like “Who is a Jew?” or the *tefillin* campaign. As he saw it, these issues weren’t Chabad issues — these were Jewish issues.

Yes, Chabad Chassidim went out into the streets to encourage Jews to put on *tefillin*, but — as the Rebbe emphasized to Gershon — this was a commandment from the Torah. This was Jewish law according to the *Shulchan Aruch*, not a Chabad concern alone.

The Rebbe told Gershon that, many a time, he will do more good for the cause if he *doesn’t* mention Chabad. So that’s the way Gershon wrote his articles.

At one point, Gershon had had a lot of complaints about the paper not being religious enough. So he went to ask the Rebbe about that. The Rebbe’s response was, “I don’t doubt that there are other people out there who think the paper is *too* religious.”

And then he gave Gershon this advice: “A newspaper is for people who read newspapers and who do not sit and learn Torah all day. In the *Algemeiner Journal*, they are able to at least read one column that contains words of Torah, among the material that they are interested in — like literature and culture and articles by excellent writers. If you don’t give them these things, they won’t buy the paper. But when they do, they will also get words of Torah and news about religious institutions and religious events, and other information about *Yiddishkeit*. If you give your readers that, you have fulfilled your function.”

That was the Rebbe’s wisdom, and Gershon followed his advice. And because of this the *Algemeiner Journal* became such a great success.

Mrs. Tzivia Jacobson is the wife of the late Gershon Jacobson, the founder, publisher and editor of the *Algemeiner Journal*. She was interviewed twice in the *My Encounter Studio* in December, 2014 and January, 2015.

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

This week in....

> **5729-1968**, the Rebbe wrote to Rabbi Moshe Segal, a Jewish activist who was instrumental in re-founding the Tzemach Tzedek Synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem after its liberation in the Six Day War, instructing that the board of the synagogue include members of Chabad organizations across the world. The Tzemach Tzedek synagogue, the Rebbe explained, is the representative of every chabad shul from all over the world, in the old city. And this board should institute the customs and guidelines for the Shul to follow.¹ *13 Cheshvan*

1. *Igrois Kodesh* vol. 26, pg. 12

לע"נ ר' רפאל משה בן ר' יעקב מנחם מענדל הכהן

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