

HERE'S my STORY

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GIL HIRSCH

As a college student in the early 1960s, I had occasion to attend a psychology seminar in Bethel, Maine. Since kosher meat and bread would not be available, my mother prepared a large care package, including salami and some matzah. Fruits and vegetables I planned to purchase locally.

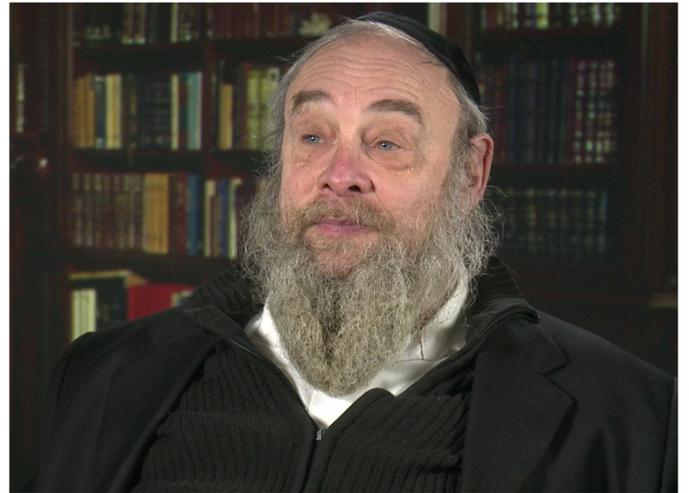
When I arrived, I noticed that the majority of the three hundred participants were Jewish, but I was the only one with a *yarmulke*. Immediately, several students came over to ask me, "Where are you getting kosher food?"

I offered to share my salami with them, and together we figured out how to prepare our meals in the seminar's kitchen.

Other students also came over to me to ask questions about Judaism. Although I was not brought up *chasidic*, I had admired Chabad's outreach work among unaffiliated Jews and I had brought a packet of Chabad brochures with me. Within a couple of days, I had given them all out, so I wrote a letter to Rabbi Leibel Groner, the Rebbe's secretary, requesting more. In my letter, I said that I'd been speaking with many Jewish students who had never seen an Orthodox Jew in their entire lives, and I expressed pessimism as to what effect I could possibly have on them since, once the seminar was over, they would return to their secular environments.

Rabbi Groner showed my letter to the Rebbe and, a short while later, he called me to convey the Rebbe's message: "*M'darf ton, der Aibershter vet upton* — You need to do whatever you can. Leave the rest to G-d."

Once I heard this, I was invigorated, and I never missed an opportunity to speak with those who were curious about Torah observance. Most of the students appreciated my efforts and, at the celebration



concluding the seminar, they danced the Hora in my honor.

When I returned to New York, I went to a *farbrengen* at Chabad headquarters. As I entered the room, the Rebbe noticed me and, his face beaming, congratulated me for my outreach work in spreading Judaism and invited me to say *L'Chaim*.

At that moment, I felt as though the Rebbe was extending an invitation to me to become a *chasid*, his follower. I decided to accept it, and from then I have considered myself a *chasid* of the Rebbe.

A short while later, I enrolled in the Chabad *yeshiva* and studied there until my marriage which took place in 1967.

A year later, my wife was not yet pregnant, so we went in to see the Rebbe to ask for his blessing, and also to ask his advice whether we should consult a doctor. In the written request which I presented to the Rebbe

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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 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@jemedi.org

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at the audience, I had added that my wife and I were ready to become the Rebbe's emissaries and to travel to any far-flung place that he chose.

His response to us was: "After the baby is born, then you will get your assignment."

When we left, we were flying, we were so happy. The Rebbe had promised us that we would have a child, and then we would become his emissaries.

Three years later, a few weeks after little Chana Etki was born, we came to see the Rebbe again. We thanked him for his blessing which assured her birth, and we reiterated our readiness to travel anywhere on the globe.

But he said, "Why do you have to travel? You can be my emissaries right here in Brooklyn."

And this is what we did. We threw ourselves into outreach work locally. Every week, my wife and I would invite college students to share our Shabbos meals; inevitably, they were mesmerized by this beautiful, spiritual experience in a warm *chasidic* home. As a result, I am happy to say, we brought hundreds of young Jews back to Judaism.

As far as making a living, the Rebbe recommended that we open a flower shop in Crown Heights.

This came about because the Chabad organization — as part of an expansion plan — bought the building next door to 770 Eastern Parkway. In that building there had been a flower shop, which moved out shortly after the sale went through. And, eventually, the Chabad synagogue extended into that space.

In 1975, when I went to see the Rebbe to discuss prospects for livelihood — which included operating a parking garage — the Rebbe said to me, "I would like to see a flower shop on Kingston Avenue where people in the community can procure flowers for their happy occasions. There was a flower shop here for many, many years, and I would like for you to establish a flower shop here again." He then continued, explaining to me in detail how one goes about setting up such a shop, and how it can be successful. To get started, he suggested that I bring my father-in-law, who was

a florist, into the business. And that was a good idea because at the time I did not know the difference between a rose and a carnation.

I did exactly as the Rebbe advised. I sought out the help of my father-in-law, rented a store and, two weeks later, I was happy to report to the Rebbe that there was a flower shop on Kingston Avenue.

Subsequently, when my wife went to see the Rebbe in the ninth month of her pregnancy to request his blessing for a successful delivery, he inquired about the business. He was very interested in every detail.

During the course of the conversation, my wife mentioned that ours was a very tiny store, and immediately the Rebbe asked if anything larger was available. When he heard that there was, he instructed us to purchase it, and even personally contributed several hundred dollars to the cause.

We followed the Rebbe's advice, and from the day we opened, we did very well. Flowers are a luxury and flower shops often fail, so ours was a rare success story. But, we had the Rebbe's blessing and guidance, so our success was guaranteed.

Gil Hirsh is the owner of Crown Heights Florists and Fruit Baskets. He was interviewed in the My Encounter Studio in February 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....

> **5746 - 1985**, at a Shabbos *farbrengen*, the Rebbe encouraged publicizing Chabad's outreach activities around the world, explaining that this will encourage both the reader of these events, as well as the ones who are *being* publicized, pushing to improve even more. Shortly afterwards the book, "And There Was Light," featuring photos of public Menorahs around the world, was published.¹ 2 Teves

1. Hisvaaduyos 5746 vol. 2 p. 192

In honor of the marriage of our dear children

Peretz and Chaya Mushka Lazaroff

3 Teves, 5776

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mystory@jemedi.org | myencounterblog.com | 718-774-6000
784 Eastern Parkway | Suite 403 | Brooklyn, NY 11213

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