

# HERE'S my STORY

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## A LUBAVITCHER CHASID

**RABBI HERBERT BOMZER**



**M**y name is Herbert (Chaim Zev) Bomzer. I was ordained a rabbi by Rabbi Moshe Feinstein and also by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik at Yeshiva University, where I obtained a doctorate in Jewish Education. For forty years, until my retirement in 1995, I served as the rabbi of Young Israel of Ocean Parkway and as professor of Talmud at Yeshiva University. I mention this because my education and career path have been decidedly Modern Orthodox, yet I call myself a Lubavitcher *chasid*. And I'd like to tell the story of how that came about.

It all began about thirty-five years ago when I befriended Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky, who worked for Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch, under the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

Around this time my oldest daughter Etty was going through a rough time. She had gotten married to a wonderful young man, a Kohen, a real scholar, and was trying to have a family. But each time she got pregnant she would miscarry. It happened once, twice, three times. Each time - heartbreak.

And then she got pregnant for the fourth time — this was

in 1983 — and we were all holding our breath. I confided my concerns to Rabbi Kotlarsky. "My daughter is two months pregnant and having a very hard time," I told him.

"Why don't you write a letter to the Rebbe?" he asked.

I said, "Moshe, I've never done a thing like that... I don't even know the formalities of how to write a letter to the Rebbe." I mean writing "To our holy Rebbe" was just not part of my vocabulary. But he promised to help me, so I agreed to do it. After all, what wouldn't I do for my daughter?

I wrote the letter which was delivered to the Rebbe's office. Rabbi Leibel Groner, the Rebbe's secretary, said that it would take two to three days to get an answer. But just one hour later, the answer came back! The Rebbe said, "She should remain in bed for the next seven months, and she will have a living child."

It so happened that when I got the answer my daughter was staying in our house. She lived in New Jersey but she had come into Brooklyn for an appointment with a doctor that was scheduled for the next morning. This doctor, a Filipino woman at Caledonian Hospital here, was supposed to be the expert in these matters.

So I told my daughter what the Rebbe advised. But she said, "What about the appointment with this doctor? What should we do?"

I wasn't that much of a *chasid* yet, so I said, "Okay, I'll take you to the doctor."

The next day I took her to the doctor and, when she came out, she said, "Daddy, I don't know what's happening here. The doctor said that if I get into bed for the next seven months, I have a good chance of having a live baby."

Now, how do you like that? The doctor reached the same conclusion — she confirmed what the Rebbe already knew!

Etty stayed in our house for the next seven months and

*continued on reverse*

MY ENCOUNTER  
with the **REBBE**

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continued from reverse

gave birth, thank G-d, to a healthy baby girl.

After these events, Rabbi Kotlarsky and I became even closer friends, and he began to encourage me to come to the Rebbe's *farbrengens*. At first I put him off — it just wasn't my style — but finally I agreed. I was seated right up front and in between the Torah talks, the Rebbe distributed wine. I took a tiny sip because I am allergic to wine. I go into shock and pass out when I drink a quantity of it, so even on Passover — when we are obligated to drink four cups of wine — I stick to grape juice.

The Rebbe saw that I wasn't drinking, and he motioned that I should drink more. I made a blessing, said "L'Chaim," and took another small sip. But the Rebbe motioned for me again to drink more. Rabbi Kotlarsky also nudged me, "Do what the Rebbe says."

So I said, "I hope there is a paramedic handy," and I drank the full cup.

And... nothing happened. I couldn't believe that I didn't get sick — it was as if, in the presence of the Rebbe, I was protected.

After that I began to come to the *farbrengens* very, very often and I also got to know Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Hodakov who was the Rebbe's chief of staff. He was very interested in knowing what's doing in the American rabbinate, and what's doing in the *yeshivas*, as I was part of that world. We met very often. Whenever I was at 770, the Rebbe would smile and greet me warmly as he'd be walking in or out of the synagogue.

In 1987, at the behest of the Rebbe, I made a trip to Russia where I spent two weeks, acting — for all intents and purposes — as the Rebbe's emissary. My task (because there were no rabbis in Moscow at this time) was to make sure that divorce documents were issued in accordance with Jewish law; to free the women so that they should be able to remarry, otherwise they would have remained unmarried *agunas*. I also made sure that any conversions that needed to be carried out were done according to Jewish law.

Chabad was just about the only organization that was active in Russia at the time, helping to keep Judaism alive. In the seventy years under Communism, a great percentage of Jews just forgot they were Jewish. Seventy years is a long time, but Chabad was active during all those years when it was terribly dangerous to do so.

לע"נ השליח הרב שמחה ירחמיאל בן ר' מרדכי שכנא

Dedicated to **Rabbi Simcha Zirkind**,  
*shliach of the Rebbe for over five decades,*  
*who lovingly dedicated his life to the Jewish*  
*community in Tunisia, Quebec and beyond.*

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Although *glasnost*, which heralded the greater freedom of information and the eventual fall of the Soviet Union, came shortly thereafter, in 1987 it was still nerve-wracking for a Jew to enter the country, especially carrying *tefillin*, *tzitzis*, and *matzos*. My wife and I were stopped at the airport and searched for six hours before we were allowed in. I claimed that I was a professor of Jewish Literature, invited to give lectures to various groups. That wasn't a lie — I did deliver lectures — but my chief purpose was to influence Jews, issue divorce documents and conduct conversions.

For the conversions, we needed a ritual pool, a *mikvah* which had to be cleaned out and filled with water. We had to wait for the water to fill the pool which was taking a long time. Suddenly, even though it was June, the sky grew dark and a heavy downpour started which lasted two hours. When the sun came out again, the *mikvah* was full of water.

Upon return, I reported on the trip to the Rebbe, and I mentioned that when I met people in Russia, I identified myself as "a *chasid* of the Lubavitcher Rebbe," but never as "a Lubavitcher *chasid*."

The Rebbe said to me, "The time has come for you to say that you are a Lubavitcher *chasid*." I replied, "Rebbe — I don't know if I am, but I am one thousand percent sure that I am a *chasid* of the Rebbe."

He said, "The time has come."

So after that I began to say, "I'm a Lubavitcher *chasid*."

*Rabbi Dr. Herbert (Chaim Zev) Bomzer, a long-standing member of the Rabbinical Council of America and rabbi of the Young Israel of Ocean Parkway for 40 years, passed away in February of 2013. He was interviewed in his home in Brooklyn in June of 2009.*

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

## This week in....

> **5733 - 1973**, in a letter, the Rebbe encouraged Rabbi Dovid Raskin that, on his upcoming visit to Israel, he should raise awareness about the life-and-death urgency of educating Jewish youth across the world.<sup>1</sup>  
*1 Menachem Av*

1. *Igros Kodesh* Vol. 30, p. 277

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