

HERE'S my STORY

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"HE THINKS I DON'T KNOW"

RABBI HIRSHEL CHITRIK



arrived from New York to take her to America. The necessary documents took a while to arrange and this is when I got to know him.

He made everybody feel so good, even in uncomfortable circumstances. For example, once he started to tell a story, and I interrupted him; I jumped up, miffed, "Hey, I told this story yesterday!" He smiled at me so kindly and said, "Please understand — once I've heard a story from my father-in-law, I don't listen to that story again from anybody else, because I don't want to mix up their version with what I heard from him."

How could I be upset, if he had such a good reason and he explained it in such a nice way?!

I also remember another incident. Before Passover, I went to prepare matzah — which required buying wheat and having it ground into flour. As the flour sacks were being readied for transport, I had to make sure nobody took them — something I couldn't allow to happen. This was the special flour for Passover! So I lay down on top of the sacks and my jacket turned completely white, though I didn't know it. When I got on the train back to Paris, people were laughing at me, but I thought nothing of it, because the French often made fun of the Jews. When I got home, the Rebbe looked at me and said, "Go look in the mirror!" And he took me by the hand to the washroom and helped me clean up.

I followed him around whenever I could, always walking behind him. When he came to pray in one shul, everyone got very excited to see him, and started calling for him to give a talk, "Reb Mendel, Reb Mendel, please speak some words of Torah!"

He was reluctant but they insisted, so he finally relented. Because they were learning the laws of *tefilin* at that time, he spoke about the length of the straps. He quoted the *Shulchan Aruch HaRav*, authored by the Alter Rebbe, the founder of the Chabad Movement, and he explained

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I spent most of World War Two in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, learning in the Lubavitcher Yeshiva there. After the war ended, the Previous Rebbe dispatched my father to Antwerp to help reopen the Etz Chaim Heida Yeshiva, and I also went, but I didn't stay there — I moved on to Paris, because it was easier to get a visa for America in France than in Belgium.

It was while I was in Paris, waiting six months for my visa to come through, that I met the Previous Rebbe's son-in-law, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson — who would later become the Rebbe — and his mother, Rebbetzin Chana.

The Rebbetzin had been trapped in Russia during the war but, once it ended, she made her way via various DP camps to Paris. She came there in 1947 and she stayed in the house of her cousin Rabbi Zalman Schneerson, which is where I was also staying.

We often ate dinner together, and we became very friendly. I was there when, to her great joy, her son

MY ENCOUNTER
with the
REBBE

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

continued from reverse

why one of the head straps has to be longer than the other one.

As I followed him around, I observed him very closely. I paid attention to his every move. I saw that he used to divide his day into two hour shifts — two hours he spent learning Torah (Chumash), then two hours he spent learning Talmud, then two hours he spent learning *Tanya*, and so forth. If something happened and one of those sessions had to be postponed, he made it up at night. Which meant he got less sleep. It seemed to me he slept only three or four hours each night. I tried to imitate him, but I couldn't keep up.

This is when I became his ardent follower, his *chasid* though he was not yet the Rebbe and I had no way of knowing he would become the Rebbe.

The thing that impressed me most though was his love for his mother. And this is the story I really want to tell about him.

Very recently, I had an encounter with an important leader of American Jewry and he asked me why it is that so many people admire the Rebbe. So I told him this story about the Rebbe and his mother to explain why the Rebbe was so special.

Once she was already living in New York, I used to visit with Rebbetzin Chana often. She spoke a beautiful Russian and she liked to converse in Russian, which is something we had in common. I would spend a half-hour with her whenever I had the time.

Often, when I arrived, the Rebbe opened the door for me, because he visited his mother every day. When he did, he'd say to me, "Thank you for coming to spend time with my mother." And then he would walk out, but he did it in an odd way. I noticed that as he went to the door, one time he rearranged the chairs, another time he straightened the picture on the wall, that sort of thing. I saw him do this, once, twice, three times. And I didn't understand what was going on.

The Rebbetzin saw me watching her son, and she said, "I see that you are paying attention to what he is doing. Not everybody is that observant. So I'll tell you what this is about ... Since the day of his Bar Mitzvah, he has never turned his back to me. I have never seen his back in all those years. He thinks I don't know what he is doing, but I know."

And then I understood that out of his great love and

respect for his mother, he always went out sideways, and he tried not to make it obvious; he pretended to be busy straightening the furniture, but it was so that he didn't have to turn away from her.

When I finished this story to the important leader of American Jewry, I asked him, "Could you do such a thing?" And he said, "I don't think so. And certainly not from Bar Mitzvah age."

And yet that is what the Rebbetzin said. From age 13, she never saw her son's back. He was so totally in control of himself, he had such total awareness that he was able to keep his respect for his mother ever and always in the forefront of his mind. I myself saw how he used to walk her out of the synagogue at Chabad Headquarters whenever she came there.

He always took her hand and tucked it under his arm, and then he walked her down the staircase to the street. There the ladies would take over and escort her home. But he stayed watching as she made her way down the street until she turned the corner and disappeared from view. It was very touching.

He was a real model of how a son, who wants to show the utmost respect to his mother, should behave.

Rabbi Hirshel Chitrik, of blessed memory, was a philanthropist and a respected member of the Crown Heights Community. He was interviewed in his home in January of 2009.

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

This week in....

> **5745 - 1984**, at a *farbrengen* marking the twentieth *yahrzeit* of his mother, Rebbetzin Chana Schneerson, the Rebbe vehemently disagreed with the notion that women's "equality" to men, is best expressed by women emulating the role of men in society. The Rebbe taught that this approach actually discredits a woman's unique feminine qualities and inhibits her from fulfilling her distinct role. He spoke at length about the exalted status of women in the Torah and the great responsibilities she carries.¹
6 Tishrei

1. *Hisvaaduyos 5745 vol. 1, p. 128*

לזכות

הרב יוסף יהושע משה ב"ר שמואל הלוי
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