

HERE'S my STORY

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THE MIRACLE OF SOUTH AFRICA

RABBI YOSSY GOLDMAN

My name is Yosef Yitzchak (Yossy) Goldman. I was named after the Previous Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, having been born right after his passing. When my name was announced at my *bris*, there was a collective gasp, since I was one of the first babies named after him, and the community's sense of loss was still very fresh and very raw.

As behooves a namesake of a Rebbe, after I completed my studies, I became the Rebbe's emissary in a far-off land — in my case, South Africa. This happened in 1976, and it came about partly at the instigation of Rabbi Mendel Lipskar. He was the first Chabad emissary to go there, and — since we had been students together in *yeshiva* and good friends — he wanted me to join him.

Even before I was married, he was already talking to me about it, but I needed to get some more learning under my belt first. When the time came, I had many options. I thought about going to St. Louis because I wanted to serve in a big city, and St. Louis was the biggest city in North America that didn't have a Chabad presence. But Mendel said to me, "When you consult the Rebbe, please also put Johannesburg on the list."

And that is what I did. I wrote to the Rebbe presenting my options, and the Rebbe returned my letter with the word Johannesburg underlined. So with one stroke of the pen, the Rebbe dispatched me — and my wife and two small children — to South Africa, which proved to be exactly the right place for us. We went there in 1976 and never looked back.

In hindsight, I don't know how many Chabad emissaries make a life-long commitment to go to a place they've never been to before. But that's what we did. I signed up for a mission on the other side of the world in darkest Africa, which back then was much farther away from New York than it is today. I guess I was naïve or idealistic, or both, but I never took a trip to check it out. I went trusting the Rebbe that this is where I belonged — that it was our purpose in life to serve the Jews of Johannesburg.



I say "our" because the Rebbe was always careful to include the wives. When I wrote to ask his advice, I made sure to state that my wife is with me, that she is a partner in this mission, and that she is as happy as I am to go wherever the Rebbe decides.

Those who didn't include their wives when they wrote to the Rebbe requesting his advice were inevitably asked, "Are you writing on behalf of both of you?" The Rebbe made it clear to his emissaries that it can't be just you deciding on your own and then informing your wife after the fact. The Rebbe made it clear that it's a partnership — it's a team effort.

My wife, thank G-d, was very happy to get the Rebbe's answer even though we were being sent to such a distant and strange place. Remember, this was the "old" South Africa — the apartheid regime, the racist, whites-only government, where blacks were not allowed to vote, where the whites ruled. This was the regime in South Africa from 1948 until 1994, when Nelson Mandela came into office, the first black man democratically elected as president of South Africa and, from then on, it was the

continued on reverse

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@jemediia.org

"new" South Africa.

Of course, when the process of change began, the Jewish people in the country were very scared as to what would happen next. They were afraid of backlash against all white people, of violence, of chaos. But the Rebbe saved our community. He reassured people that everything would be okay — Jews do not have to panic and run away from South Africa. We did lose about a third of the Jewish community, but we would have lost many more had it not been for the Rebbe's constant guidance, assurances and reassurances.

Even Jews who were not at all religious remained in South Africa only because the Lubavitcher Rebbe had stated publically that it would be safe for them to stay in the country. In the rest of Africa, there were violent revolutions, with the British, Belgian or French colonial governments overthrown in bloody upheavals. But that didn't happen in South Africa. The apartheid regime was ousted, but in a relatively peaceful manner.

Still, whenever there was an incident — and there were some — people would want to know, "What does the Rebbe say now?" I remember once, after a particularly violent occurrence, people were very worried and asking, "Is this the beginning of the end? What does the Rebbe say now?"

Under pressure from the community, reluctantly, I wrote to the Rebbe, who answered, "I'm surprised that you're asking again. I've already stated my opinion. Don't worry. It will be good for Jews in South Africa until Moshiach. And after Moshiach, it will be even better."

I wrote about it on the 20th anniversary of the Rebbe's passing for the *Jewish Life* magazine, in an article entitled, "The Man Who Saved Our Community."

I wrote that his words of confidence and optimism made all the difference. In the whole of South Africa, the Rebbe's name was a household word, and I am talking here about Jews who were involved and those who were not involved, who were observant and not observant. Everybody knew that the Lubavitcher Rebbe had made an absolute, definitive statement about the future of South Africa — everything would turn out fine, and there was no reason to panic and run away.

At one point, I was confronted by those promoting immigration to Israel: "Why is the Rebbe against *aliyah*?" I answered, "The Rebbe is not commenting on the

question of Israel or *aliyah*. The Rebbe is saying there's no reason to run away from South Africa." In any event, most people who were leaving were not going to Israel; they were going to America or Canada or Australia.

In 1994, just before the elections which brought Nelson Mandela to office, people were again afraid. A lot of people emigrated then, and those who didn't were hoarding food in case of riots that would prevent them from being able to leave the house. People were prepared for the worst. And what happened?

Election day was the most beautiful, blissful, idyllic scene of lines and queues of people waiting to vote — black and white together — and an unprecedented spirit of unity prevailed.

The media doesn't usually use the word "miracle." But you heard that word used by international media outlets which had come to showcase this great political event. They came to document a revolution, but they documented a miraculously peaceful transition to democracy.

A member of the community called me then to say, "The Rebbe has been vindicated." The Rebbe was absolutely right, and in the end, there was nothing to fear.

Rabbi Yossy Goldman has served as an emissary of the Rebbe in South Africa since 1976, first in Johannesburg and, more recently, as the senior rabbi at the Sydenham Shul. He was interviewed in the My Encounter Studio in Brooklyn in October 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....

> **5741 - 1980**, the Rebbe began the practice of delivering a talk every night of Sukkos, in commemoration of *Simchas Beis Hashoevah* — Water Libation Ceremony — which took place in the times of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The Rebbe spoke of the great joy which the days of Sukkos bring, encouraging people to sing and dance in the street.¹
15 Tishrei

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In honor of

Our Dear Rebbe

by

Miriam and Moshe Fishman, Los Angeles, CA and Anonymous

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