



— A YECHIDUS —

TEN YEARS LONG

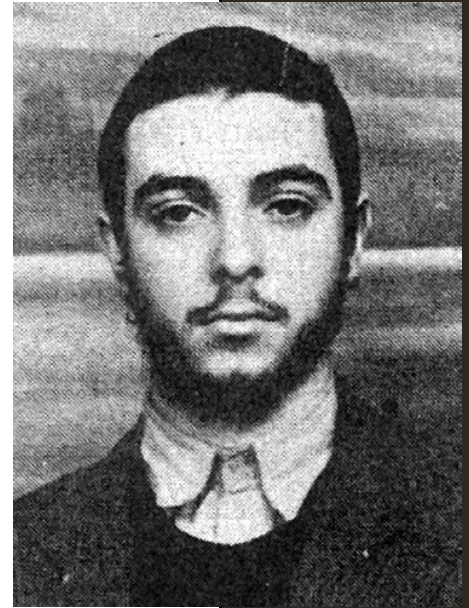
The following story was recounted by one of its very protagonists – Reb Yoel Kahn, the chief Chozer in the Rebbe's court. As a young bochur, Reb Yoel along with other bochurim studying in 770, heeded the Rebbe's call to pay visits to other Yeshivos and spread the teachings of Chassidus.

This story took place in 5712, at the very dawn of the Rebbe's *nesius*. Once a week, a few friends and I would get a car, which was no small matter in those days, and travel to a Litvishe yeshiva nearby, to set up shiurim in chassidus with the local bochurim.

It was a rather prominent Yeshiva, known far and wide in the *yeshivishe* world, for its high academic standards, and its most acclaimed array of brilliant students. I remember that Rabbi Hodakov was very adamant that we be consistent and punctual on our visits there, presumably because the impact we could have was not indifferent.

Indeed we kept our visits on a constant basis and over time we even developed a relationship with some of the bochurim there. There was one particular bochur

Right: Reb Yoel Kahan
as a Young Bochur.



Rebbe one doesn't set an appointment over-night; there were people who had requested to see the Rebbe some several months earlier, and their turn was yet to come.

I returned to 770, eager to speak with Rabbi Hodakov, and get my litvishe friend a yechidus. I was quite pleased, that on his own prerogative he had come forward asking to see the Rebbe. I promised myself not to let this occasion pass, for who knew when another such opportunity would arise!

I knew what had to be done. I ran to Rabbi Hodakov's office and told him the whole story. I begged him to grant this

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whom I became especially close with, and although he never attended my shiur in chassidus, he was always very friendly to me, and made a point to talk to me in learning whenever I visited.

Now, he was no simpleton; this fellow was the *illuy* of the Yeshiva. He was the boy everyone else respected and revered for his excellence in scholarship, he was privy to special attention on behalf of the Roshei Yeshiva who reserved a rare honorary treatment for him, and he was often consulted with, when a discussion among bochurim arose. His opinion was always taken into serious consideration in scholarly matters, and his words carried much weight, often acting as the measuring stick in debates.

He was *the* prodigy.

One evening, after our weekly shiur had concluded, my talented friend approached me, and asked me for a big favor: he wanted me to arrange a Yechidus with the Rebbe for him!

“I only need two minutes” - he explained to me. I gave him my word that I would try, but had him know that with the

bochur his wish, specifically since he said he needed no more than two minutes of the Rebbe's time.

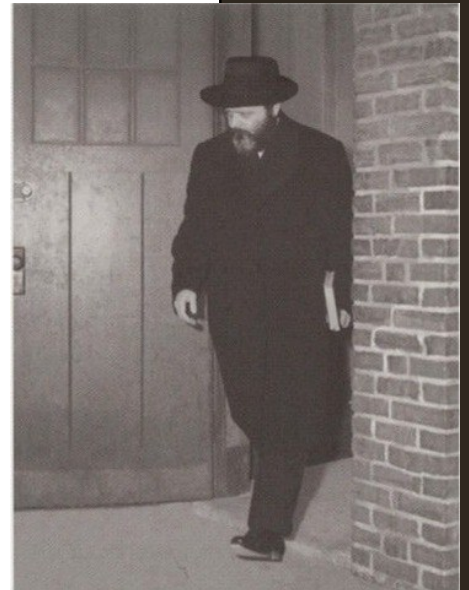
At first he firmly refused, saying that the Rebbe's yechidus schedule was over-booked, and that adding another person to the list was just out of the question.

But I wasn't quick to renounce: I made my case before him and explained that given the enormous respect this bochur is accorded in his circles, and the influence he exerts on his peers, it would be a major *Kiddush shem Lubavitch*, if one day he were to arrive in Yeshiva full of praise about the Lubavitcher Rebbe! It was a chance we simply couldn't afford to miss.

I was relentless, and finally Rabbi Hodakov submitted to me, but on his part, he asked of me to advise this bochur that he was indeed being accorded no more than two minutes inside the Rebbe's room.

Said and done.

On the next occasion I went to give a shiur in his yeshiva, I went over to the bochur and told him that I had set him a yechidus with the Rebbe, and it was coming up in the near future. Additionally, I



told him I would be there as soon as he would exit the Yechidus, to talk about his experience with him.

At the set time the bochur arrived at 770, and was quickly ushered into *gan eden ha'elyon*, the Rebbe's study.

Two minutes came and went, and Rabbi Hodakov didn't hide his irritation; time was passing and my friend was still inside. More than I was uneasy from Rabbi Hodakov's frowns, I was tremendously curious as to what was happening inside the Rebbe's room.

After a long hour, the illuy, finally emerged, looking visibly fatigued and shaken. I rushed over to him, and bombarded him with questions, "What happened? What did the Rebbe say?" But he brushed me away and refused to talk. He dashed to the door, and in a moment he was outside. I followed him into the street, trying to make sense of his wrath; perhaps he hadn't understood what the Rebbe had said. Nothing, he just wouldn't say.

We parted in the street, and I was dumbfounded: what happened behind closed doors that stirred this bochur so much?

I continued going on my routine visits to the litvishe yeshiva, but things weren't the same with my friend; he was cold and evasive towards me, and we hardly ever spoke again since that fateful night.

We each moved on with our lives, and several years passed.

To be precise, ten years passed. One Motzei Shabbos in the spring of 5722 I was walking home from 770, when I heard someone calling my name. I turned around, and lo and behold... my long lost genius acquaintance was standing before me!

"Let's learn some chassidus!" he tells me.

I was caught quite unprepared, so I suggested that perhaps we go to my house and catch up on the last ten years, and maybe understand how he ended up in Crown Heights on a random Motzei Shabbos.

We sat down in my living room and his life story just poured like an endless stream:

"I come from a *chassidishe* family and I was raised in a chassidishe environment." -he began.

"That held true until I went to Yeshiva. When I left home I threw myself com-

pletely into learning, I became almost obsessed with it. I devoted all my time to Gemoro, and hardly ever did anything else, I was well on my way to becoming a *godol*! As years passed I gradually became estranged with the warmth and pleasant atmosphere of the chassidishe home I was raised in.

The fruit of my labor was already showing, when I became the most respected bochur in yeshiva, and everyone was singing my praises. This only encouraged me to commit even more to the path I had chosen.

When I came to ask you to fix an appointment for me with the Rebbe, I had been learning a particular topic and gotten stuck on one point. I turned to all the Roshei Yeshivos for answers, but to no avail. Everyone gave me their tentative responses, but nothing really resonated with me. That's when I decided to approach the Rebbe about it.

I had told you I only needed two minutes, because I had made up my mind before, that if the Rebbe were able to give me a straight and quick answer, I'd be satisfied, and would walk out immediately after that, but if he were to take longer, then it was my sign that I had once more run into a glass wall, and the Rebbe too

had no answer.

When I went into Yechidus, I wrote down my question, and the Rebbe replied so effortlessly and quickly, that it seemed like he too was just learning that topic, and for my part I was content - impressed but content.

Just when I was getting up to leave, the Rebbe asked me, "*Vos is mit limud ha-chassidus?*" And I froze.

I had never learnt any chassidus, let alone diligently, nor did that bother me. But the Rebbe had a whole different idea.

He explained to me that Chassidus is the axis which makes all other facets of Torah go round. Without learning Chassidus, the Rebbe told me, one cannot truly learn Torah altogether. Because, though Torah in its entirety is the supernal knowledge and will of Hashem, His authorship on it is hidden in the vast majority of its pages, and one can go astray if he isn't constantly cognizant of the *aybershter's* presence in its every letter and word.

Chassidus on the other hand, inasmuch as it highlights and pursues the knowledge of Hashem Himself, makes the learner aware of the true value of Torah: namely, the mere fact that it is Hashem's very own essence written down on paper, as it were.

The Rebbe then warned me of the peril

**"The Rebbe's Farbrengens are precious!
Elokus shines in every bit of them..."**



that lay in learning without Chassidus; he said that learning without the sole aspiration of connecting with the aybershter, inevitably leads one to learn with an agenda, and no matter how lofty and sublime the motive may be, if that inspiration were one day to falter, then so would his pursuit of learning.

The further illustrate his point, the Rebbe gave me an example. He said that if we were to assume that we would see a father and son, who had not met in several years, finally reuniting in a loving embrace, could we even fathom asking the son why he's so passionately and lovingly hugging his father? It is obvious that there is no agenda nor ulterior goal in the embrace, apart for the sole fact that this is his father, and he loves him dearly¹."

'And now' –the Rebbe asked me, 'Have you ever seen anyone learning with that love, and with that devotion in your circles?'

"I was forced to admit I hadn't. But with incredible *chutzpa* I returned the question to the Rebbe and asked: 'What about the Rebbe? Has he ever seen such learning?' Without hesitation the Rebbe told me he indeed had.

I was deeply troubled. In my heart of hearts I sensed that the Rebbe was right, and 'this is where it's at', but my intellect told me I could not commit to this radical change in lifestyle and abandon the glory and reputation I had built for myself over the years. I firmly decided then and there, that the only way was to forget everything I had heard, and continue on my way, like nothing had ever happened.

That's when you saw me coming out of Yechidus, and I ignored you, and ran out. I knew that were I to stay even one more minute in there, I would have been sold, and *that* I couldn't afford to do.

Weeks passed uneventfully, and I resumed on my rigorous study schedule, deliberately ignoring what I had learnt in 770 that night.

One fine day, deep in a discussion in gemoro with my chavrusa, I posed a potential answer to a question that had arisen, and he dismissed it as sheer lunacy. He shared it with his peers, and before long I was the laughing stock of the yeshiva.

(Reb Yoel recounts that the man recounted exactly what it was that he had said in the discussion, and it sounded

quite profound and intelligent, not something one would dismiss so easily.)

I was furious. In truth, that my opinion had been discarded, didn't bother me as much as the brazenness and disrespect with which it was being done, did. Was I not the illuy of the Yeshiva? The affront of scorning at my notion to me was tantamount to stripping me of my honors and titles.

Slowly my assiduity weakened and my fervent passion was cooling down, till I lost all interest in learning by and large.

I got married, not to the daughter of a big *rov* as I had always envisioned, but to a simple girl from a modest family, and I embarked on a business, where *boruch hashem*, I grew very successful.

Years passed, when a void began taking root deep inside of me. I was rather wealthy, and had all I wanted to have, but life became dull, and empty. There was no excitement, no passion, something was lacking, and reminiscing of the good times passed in yeshiva, I grew nostalgic of those sweet days when I learnt Torah without a care in the world, and enjoyed it.

As a thirsty man seeks water, I desperately began searching for learning. I set up a few *chavrusas* with other young professionals and felt mildly comforted.

But it wasn't it. There was a voice within me screaming for something deeper, something genuinely authentic.

A mere few months ago while reading the paper, I chanced upon an advertisement about the upcoming Yud Tes Kislev (5722) Farbrengen with the Rebbe.

Suddenly it all came back to me; my yechidus, the Rebbe's words, and most importantly - my knee-jerk reaction to them. I decided I would pay a visit, and maybe, just maybe I might find solace for my bruised soul.

I arrived in 770 well in the middle of the Farbrengen, and the Rebbe was already delivering the Maamar. It was hard for me to follow along; the Rebbe's Yiddish was almost foreign to me, but most of all, his style and delivery can be difficult to decipher to the untrained student.

But one thing caught my attention the moment I walked in. I do not know where the Rebbe was going with this point, nor who it was intended to, but in that moment the Rebbe was speaking to me!

The Rebbe was expounding upon what the Alter Rebbe says in Tanya that *bal yiddach mimenu niddach*, meaning that even he who previously learnt not *lishmoh*, not with the right intentions, is nevertheless not doomed; by learning again, and this time around with the proper ideals in mind, he can refine his previous learning and elevate it to the status of *Torah lishmoh*².

I was awestruck! That was precisely me! The Rebbe was speaking to me!

I stayed for the remainder of the Farbrengen, not understanding anything, and resolved that I would come again.

I asked those standing near me when the next Farbrengen was scheduled for, and I was told that Yud Shevat, the Rebbe would again hold a large Farbrengen, the liking of that one.

Yud Shevat came, and I was in 770 from the very beginning; at last I felt peace, I was quenching the thirst I had been feeling for so many years. I stood for hours – again hardly understanding anything, and walked away at the end a happy person.

Upon leaving, I resolved I would take you up on the offer I had so stubbornly refused many years earlier, when you used to come to my yeshiva and teach chassidus.

I made it my business to find you, and start learning chassidus at the earliest convenience.

And here we are...I finally found you!"

I sat there, wondering whether a lighting hat hit me or this was all real.

I agreed to make a *kevius* together periodically, but I couldn't let him leave without asking him a question that was burning inside of me. So I gathered my courage and asked him:

"One thing, pray tell; if you don't understand anything the Rebbe is saying, why do you keep on coming back for more?!"

He looked at me as though I had fallen from the roof of the house, "What do you mean?" he replied with a smile, "The Rebbe's Farbrengens are precious! *Elokus* shines in every bit of them, you can see it, you can almost touch it! What's the difference whether I understand or not..."

1. See Toras Menachem - Hisvaaduyos vol. 21 pp. 149-150.

2. See Toras Menachem - Hisvaaduyos p.258 which corroborates this.