Fondest An Interview with **RABBI ASHER ZEILINGOLD** לע"נ מזכיר **כ"ק אדמו"ר** הרה"ח ר' ירחמיאל בנימין בן מנחם הלוי ע"ה קליין נלב"ע י"ח סיון ה'תשע"ה 'ת'נ'צ'ב'ה נדפס ע"י **משפחתו** שיחיו 40 A Chassidisher Derher / Nissan 5781

Rabbi Zeilingold has served as a shliach of the Rebbe and rabbi of the Adath Israel Shul in S. Paul, Minnesota for over five decades.

In an exclusive interview with A Chassidisher Derher, Rabbi Zeilingold tells us about the early years of his life when he became a Lubavitcher Chossid and later when he was a *bochur* learning at 770. He shares with us some of his personal stories and recollections, many of which give us a glimpse of what it was like in the Rebbe's presence during the early 5720s* and the close relationship a *bochur* felt with the Rebbe at that time.



My Background

My father was from Warsaw, Poland, where he was raised as a Stoliner Chosid. He married my mother in Eretz Yisroel and they settled in London, England, several years later, where I was born in Elul of 5700 (1940). Growing up, we lived in a very Yiddishe neighborhood and my father sent me to study at the famous veshiva known as Gateshead Talmudical College. For various reasons, my parents wanted to move to America but in those times this wasn't a simple task. The main issue was that you needed to provide proof that you had a steady source of income, after which it could take a long time to obtain visas. My father went alone to try to establish himself first, and we followed about a year or so later. Although he did not have any prior connection to Lubavitch, while he was in New York he went to the Rebbe on a few occasions and spoke to the Rebbe on various matters.

My First Encounter

On a wintery morning in 5714*, my mother and her children, including me, the youngest in the family, came off the boat from England. We joined my father in the United States and settled in New York. It so happened, b'hashgacha pratis, that the apartment my father rented for the family was just a few blocks north of 770 Eastern Parkway. An uncle of mine had a store on Kingston Avenue, and as soon as we came I wanted to go visit him, so I walked over with my father. As we were walking on Eastern Parkway, across the street from 770, my father said to me, "Look! You see the man coming towards us? He's the Lubavitcher Rebbe!" I remember very distinctly the manner in which he was walking. The Rebbe then approached us, looking at us very closely. In hindsight, although we

didn't say anything, it seems to me that that moment was the beginning of my "Coming to Lubavitch." On the same day I arrived in America, barely six hours after I got off the boat, I saw the Rebbe for the first time.

Initial Guidance

While living in New York, I went to Yeshiva Torah Vodaath in Brooklyn and didn't have much to do with Lubavitch. My father davened at the Agudah Shul on Crown Street so we would see the Rebbe on occasion but that was the extent of our connection.

When I graduated Torah Vodaath in 5717*, I had no idea what I was going to do. I hadn't made any plans for the future and for whatever reason I didn't feel like I had anyone with whom to discuss it. I spent that summer at Gan Yisroel, where a friend suggested that I write to the Rebbe asking for guidance on what to do next. That's exactly what I did. Little did I know, this would change my life forever. I wrote a letter to the Rebbe that I'm thinking of going to university but I don't know



THE REBBE ENTERS 770 AFTER VISITING GAN YISROEL IN 5717. REB ASHER IS ON THE FAR LEFT.

The Rebbe's Neighbor

While in Torah Vodaath, I had a teacher whose name was Rabbi Isbee. He wasn't a Lubavitcher but he lived at 346 New York Avenue, apartment 3D, which was directly under the Rebbe's apartment, 4D. He would see the Rebbe regularly walking in and out but nothing more than that.

I recall that he once told us with great admiration, "Last night I heard the Lubavitcher Rebbe learning Torah the whole night long!"

On another occasion, he told us something he witnessed. One day he was standing in the lobby of his apartment building where he noticed the Rebbe waiting for the elevator to go upstairs. Just as the elevator came to the lobby, a woman walked over to enter. The Rebbe opened the door and held it open for her and she walked in, then he turned around and walked up the four flights of stairs (to avoid an issue of *yichud*).

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"Look! You see the man coming towards us? He's the Lubavitcher Rebbe!"

What is the Rebbe thinking about now?

After Maariv of Yud Shevat 5718*, I left 770 and was walking home. I was under this great impression from the davening and on the way I was rethinking to myself everything I had just experienced. Out of curiosity, I wondered to myself, "Tonight is a great holy night for the Rebbe. I can't even imagine what the Rebbe is busy with at the present moment. He must have reached the most lofty of realms... I can't help but wonder - what is the Rebbe thinking about at the present moment?"

As I came home, the phone rang. I picked it up and heard Rabbi Groner on the other side of the phone. Rabbi Groner asked me, "Is your father home?" I answered that he was with my sister at the hospital. Rabbi Groner then said to me, "The Rebbe asked me to call your father, and to find out how your sister is doing. When your father gets home please have him call me, so I can notify the Rebbe on the situation."

This gave me a clear insight into who the Rebbe is. Yes, tonight is Yud Shevat. However, as a true caring father, more important to the Rebbe than anything else, is the situation of each and every single Yid.

what direction to take. The Rebbe wrote me an answer in which he suggested that for now I should study Torah beshkidah v'hasmadah (with diligence), and only in a year's time to revisit these thoughts about what to do moving forward. Obviously I followed the Rebbe's advice, and I spent the next year, 5718*, at the Lubavitcher Yeshiva in Montreal. I guess I can say that's where I became a Lubavitcher Chossid. There was truly a phenomenal atmosphere there and it was an amazing year. There was a very solid group of bochurim learning together, and together we very much grew spiritually. So much so, that by the end of the year there was no doubt in my mind as to where I'd go in the future. It was clear to me that this is where I would be staying, university was out of the question.

Traveling to the Rebbe

A few months after I arrived in Montreal, the yeshiva was to

be traveling to the Rebbe for Yud Shevat 5718*. This would be my first time coming to the Rebbe as one of his Chassidim, after a "hachana" (preparation), understanding a little bit the significance, and so on. That year Yud Shevat fell out on a Friday. On Thursday night I was in 770 and heard the Rebbe daven for the amud. It was a first for me, truly an uplifting experience. I vividly recall the crowd that had gathered, everyone attentively standing in the shul waiting for the Rebbe to enter. I was standing across the door, when suddenly the Rebbe walked out of his room and entered the shul. With his holy tone, the Rebbe began davening Maariv. I remember feeling the seriousness in the air. Motzei Shabbos was my first time attending the Rebbe's farbrengen. It was a very special farbrengen. Although I really didn't understand very much, the atmosphere uplifted me to a totally different sphere.

Yechidus

Our *mashpia* in Montreal, Reb Berel Mochkin, prepared us very well for going into *yechidus*. He explained to us the significance of *yechidus* and how we should conduct ourselves prior to entering *yechidus*. Among the different things he told us was that each of us should ask the Rebbe a question in 'avoda.'

I entered the Rebbe's room on Sunday night. The Rebbe said to me in English that he noticed me at the farbrengen the previous night and asked me, "Did you understand anything? Were you able to follow?" I answered that I was able to pick up bits and pieces here and there. The Rebbe then re-encouraged me a bit that I need not worry, saying "B'ezras Hashem next time you will understand more."

The Rebbe then went on to answering my "avoda question." I had asked the Rebbe how can I stay concentrated and keep my mind from wandering during davening. The Rebbe instructed that in addition to the regular sedarim of learning Chassidus, I should learn Chassidus for a few minutes each night before I go to sleep. He also emphasized strongly that I should be sure to always daven from the Siddur. The Rebbe then went on to tell me a *vort* on this concept to help me remember (I haven't seen this vort written or mentioned any where else). The Rebbe quoted a possuk from Megillas Esther that reads, ובבואה לפני המלך אמר עם הספר ישוב מחשבתו הרעה אשר חשב. Then he translated it to me word by word with his unique explanation in English.

The Rebbe said: "ובבואה לפני המלך" when one comes before the King, when someone is beginning to daven to Hashem, אמר עם הספר it must be said from inside the 'sefer,' meaning the siddur, for then אישוב מחשבתו הרעה אשר

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חשב—the negative thoughts he was thinking will vanish..."

A Student in 770

Towards the end of the following year, the Rebbe said to me in *yechidus* that he wants me to join the yeshiva in 770 from now on. Then, the Rebbe related to me that here in the yeshiva of 770, every Friday one of the *bochurim* says a *pilpul*, naming a few of the *bochurim* who had delivered the most recent *pilpulim*, and that he would like me to prepare one and give it on one of the following Shabbosim. (This was something that usually the older *bochurim* did. It seems to me that the Rebbe wanted to boost me a bit at this new stage in my life.)

I want to bring out to you what it was like to be around the Rebbe in those days, the early 5720s*. There was so much "wealth." It's almost painful to think to what extent we took for granted everything we received from the Rebbe. I'm talking about those small moments that in later years people learned to really cherish, we merited plenty of them. Even more so, the Rebbe's concern for us and his involvement in the details of our wellbeing, both beruchnius and begashmius. For instance, the Rebbe once saw me in the street on a wintery day without a coat. The Rebbe motioned to me by grabbing the lapel of his coat that I better put on a coat.

On another occasion, I was walking towards 770 on my way to daven Shacharis holding my tefillin and I noticed that the Rebbe was walking in front of me. As the Rebbe went up on the pathway to 770, I ran in front and opened the door for the Rebbe. The Rebbe looked at me and motioned to me that I should walk in before him, explaining "Du haltst doch a por tefillin—you're holding a pair of tefillin."

One Shabbos morning, I was sitting and learning in the *zal* when suddenly



A "PERMIT" THE BOCHURIM IN MONTREAL WOULD SHOW THE MAZKIRUS INDICATING THEY HAD PERMISSION TO COME.

the Rebbe walked in, went over to Reb Dovid Raskin and spoke a few words, then turned around and left. Immediately thereafter, Reb Dovid announced, "Whoever wants to hear a *maamar* is invited to enter the Rebbe's room." Obviously, we all went in for the *maamar*. This was a special *zechus* we merited on several occasions.

Naturally, we felt close to the Rebbe and would write to the Rebbe everything. We would consult with the Rebbe for even the smallest of issues. For example, when the dentist told me I needed to pull out a tooth, the first thing I did was ask the Rebbe, who answered me to first consult with another dentist. Everything in our lives went by the Rebbe first.

Let me tell you how writing to the Rebbe worked back then. When you enter 770 from the main door, on the right is the *mazkirus* office, the Rebbe's secretariat, in which there was a big desk. On top of the desk was a tray

in which anyone and everyone could walk in and drop off a *tzetel* for the Rebbe without anyone questioning who he is or what he wants from the Rebbe. I remember being in the office on a regular basis and seeing the enormous amount of letters the Rebbe was receiving. The Rebbe would attentively answer every individual who sought his help.

In the morning when the Rebbe would arrive in 770, he would often walk into the *mazkirus* office before going to his room. (We, the *bochurim* learning in the *zal* would rise and remain standing until the Rebbe entered his room. Sometimes that would take up to half an hour if the Rebbe stopped to speak with Rabbi Quint, one of the secretaries.)

Being that so many people were going in and out of that room, the secretaries decided to put up a barrier on one side of the desk in order to keep things orderly. The day they were

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THE TALMIDIM HASHLUCHIM TO BRUNOY DANCE ABOARD THE BOAT WHICH WOULD TAKE THEM TO FRANCE. REB ASHER (NOT PICTURED) WAS PART OF THIS GROUP.

building this barrier I happened to be standing in the *mazkirus* office when the Rebbe arrived at 770. He walked into the office and saw what they were building. The Rebbe commented that they should include a small platform on the top of the barrier, for people to have something to write a *tzetel* on.

Shidduchim

In the summer of 5723* I was 23 years old. One day Reb Dovid Raskin called me into his office and said to me that he had a *shidduch* for me. He told me I should ask the Rebbe if it was time for me to look into shidduchim, and the Rebbe answered affirmatively. A few weeks later, just before Simchas Torah, I met for the first time my future wife, Sema, the daughter of Rabbi Moshe Yitzchok Hecht. Over the next few weeks we met several more times.

A few weeks later, I was learning in the *zal* when someone came over and

said to me, "Asher, you have a phone call." I picked up the phone and heard someone on the other side screaming "Mazal tov! You just became a *chosson*." Aghast, I responded, "What mazal tov? Who is this? What are you talking about?!" Rabbi Berel Shemtov then introduced himself and began telling me the following story:

"The day after Simchas Torah I was by the Rebbe in *yechidus*. I had asked the Rebbe about a new shul in Detroit, that I wanted to ask the *bochur* Asher Zeilingold to come down and take the position as the rabbi, what does the Rebbe think?

"The Rebbe answered me, talking about you Asher. Ich vil dir epes zogen. Asher hot yetzt eimitzer getroffen. Vi ich tracht, es vet nemen fir vochen biz er vet veren a chosson. Az er vet veren a chosson vet zein "reichaim al tzavaro" vet zein gringer reden mit em. Vart up di fir vochen—I want to share something with you. Asher recently met someone.

Nichum Aveilim

Speaking of Rabbi Quint, I want to share something interesting I merited to witness. Rabbi Quint lived on Eastern Parkway, about a half a block away from 770. When he was sitting shiva, the Rebbe went to be menachem avel, and I joined. The Rebbe spoke to him for some time, then Rabbi Quint announced, "We will now be davening Maariv." He asked the Rebbe, "Will the Rebbe be davening with us? We're going to daven Nusach Ashkenaz though." The Rebbe answered that he has his makom kavua where he davens. and regarding the nusach the Rebbe said that each one of the shevatim had their own way in serving Hashem. Nonetheless the Rebbe remained there while they davened Maariv, during which he was looking into a sefer. I was watching the Rebbe and noticed something very interesting. When the chazzan said aloud the words the, בשמחה רבה ואמרו כולם Rebbe answered together with everyone, מי כמוך באלים ה'... and then again ה' ימלוך לעולם ועד.

The way I see it, it will take another four weeks until he will get engaged. Once he will get engaged, he will have the responsibility of a livelihood on his shoulders, so it will be easier to discuss with him. Wait out these four weeks.'

"Today," concluded Rabbi Shemtov, "is exactly four weeks from then, hence—mazal tov!"

The truth however is, although we were ready to get engaged at that point, it hadn't happened yet. I was supposed to meet her family in New

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A Mother's Care

Once, on a day the Rebbe went to the Ohel, after he davened Mincha in 770, the Rebbe went back to the car to go home with Rabbi Krinsky. On the way, the Rebbe stopped to visit his mother, Rebbetzin Chana, as he would do every single day. To my mazal, I was standing at the corner of Kingston and President and merited to see something very unique. Rebbetzin Chana was sitting outside on a bench talking with a few children. As the Rebbe's car pulled up and the Rebbe was getting out of the car, the Rebbetzin called out addressing the Rebbe by name and said "Gei aheim—please go home." The Rebbe asked, "Farvos—why?" and the Rebbetzin responded, "Veil du host heint noch nisht gegesn-you haven't yet eaten today." "Vi veist du—how do you know?" questioned the Rebbe. The Rebbetzin smiled, pointed to Rabbi Krinsky and said, "Krinsky is doh-Rabbi Krinsky is here." [Ed. note: Rabbi Krinsky would drive the Rebbe to the Ohel, so if the Rebbe was being accompanied by him, that was a clear indication that the Rebbe had just returned from the Ohel, and on a day that the Rebbe went to the Ohel he wouldn't eat.] Both the Rebbe and his mother began laughing. It was a very special moment to catch, to see the Rebbetzin's motherly concern for her son, our Rebbe.

Another particularly fascinating occurrence, which again offers perspective on the close relationship the Rebbe has with us, happened with me when I was a *chosson* in 5724*. Reb Dovid Raskin arranged for me and my *kallah* to visit Rebbetzin Chana. The night before we were to go to the Rebbetzin, I was walking up Kingston Avenue together with a very close friend of mine, Rabbi Shmuel Lew. As we were walking we passed by Rebbetzin Chana. She stopped us and said



REB ASHER AND REB SHMUEL LEW, IYAR 5725

hello, as she would regularly do. I then said to her, "Rebbetzin, I'm looking forward to tomorrow evening when I'm scheduled to come over to see you together with my kallah." The Rebbetzin responded while pointing towards Shmuel: "Ye ye, un du Shmuel vest oichet kumen mit dain froi-yes indeed, and you Shmuel will come together with your wife too." We both looked at her in surprise. We were coming as chosson and kalllah, why would Shmuel who was already married for some time be coming along? The Rebbetzin smiled and said, "M'hot mir gezogt az vu einer fun aich iz, geit alemohl der tzveiter oichet—somebody told me, wherever one of you is, the other always comes along." Who is the one who told Rebbetzin Chana of our friendship? I can only guess it was the Rebbe. The fact that our friendship came up in their conversation is something truly unbelievable.

Haven before we would ask the Rebbe for a *bracha* and officially get engaged. For whatever reason my going to New Haven kept getting pushed off until one day Rabbi Hodakov called me over and said to me, "The Rebbe wants to know why you haven't been to New Haven yet!"

The way the Rebbe took such personal interest in our wellbeing at that important stage of our lives is just unbelievable. Moreover, what I learned from Rabbi Shemtov was that the Rebbe knew it was the right *shidduch*, and knew each of us through and through and was able to determine exactly how long it will take for things to play out.

A few days later, my father-in-law, Rabbi Moshe Yitzchok Hecht went into *yechidus* on the occasion of our engagement and asked the Rebbe several things. Firstly, he asked if I should go to Montreal for the weeks leading up to our wedding. (In those days, the *chosson* would usually leave town during the engagement period, in order to not be living in the same neighborhood as the *kallah*.) The Rebbe instructed that I should remain in 770. My father-in-law immediately questioned why, to which the Rebbe answered, "Di Tzeirei Agudas Chabad"

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darf em hoben doh veil er geit tzu a sach pletzer reden in Chassidus—Tzeirei Agudas Chabad needs him here, because he goes to many places to lecture on Chassidus"—something that was of high importance to the Rebbe.

Then, my father-in-law asked the Rebbe regarding a date for the wedding, to which the Rebbe answered that he cannot discuss it with him until he first speaks to me on a private matter. My father-in-law was puzzled; I don't know exactly what he had asked the Rebbe, but the Rebbe said that he will speak to Rabbi Hodakov, who would give over to me the Rebbe's message.

My father-in-law informed me of this, so I went into Rabbi Hodakov's office, who said to me as follows: The Rebbe said that he knows you have an older sister who is not yet married. He therefore instructed that you buy her a gift, send it to her with someone in the family who is most close with her, and request her *mechila* for getting married before her.

This highlights a few important points: First, my family wasn't Lubavitch, yet the Rebbe remembered my older sister. Also, the Rebbe intentionally didn't speak to anyone else about this besides me, out of sensitivity to this personal issue.

Eventually, my aunt went to my sister with the gift and she said she was one hundred percent *mocheles*.

Guidance for life

When we got engaged, both my wife and I wrote to the Rebbe requesting that the Rebbe should direct us exactly on where we should settle after our wedding. (In those days it usually didn't happen that way. The usual custom was that people would find a proposition themselves and ask the Rebbe for his *bracha*.)

The Rebbe answered us saying that I should look into different

suggestions, and then write them all down and submit the list of offers to him. Then, the Rebbe would direct us on which one of these offers to take. Which is exactly what I did. I did my homework and submitted to the Rebbe 12 different suggestions that had come up. I got my letter back with the Rebbe's answer. Some of the ideas the Rebbe simply crossed out, meaning we shouldn't even consider those. Others he left open, and then directed that I should learn in Kollel for two years, after which we should revisit these options (those remaining that the Rebbe had not crossed out).

Roughly two years later I felt it was time to start moving forward. One night I sat down and again wrote a letter to the Rebbe with the (remaining) options. I went to 770 and gave this letter to the Rebbe's secretary. The very next morning I received a letter from Rabbi Moshe Feller of S. Paul, Minnesota, with an opportunity. A shul in S. Paul was looking for a rav. Immediately, I wrote down what Rabbi Feller told me, intending to give it in to the Rebbe. At the end of this paper I made note to the Rebbe that this is being written on a separate piece of paper because this idea just came up now, and not because I'm giving it any more thought than the other ideas. The Rebbe answered me by giving back this piece of paper on which he wrote: אם לדעת הר"מ פעלער יש סיכויים בזה, יתעניין—If Rabbi Feller is of the opinion that there is potential in this, [then] examine [this option]).

The rest is history. The Rebbe sent us to S. Paul shortly before Pesach 5726*. Before Tishrei we were back in New York. We went into *yechidus*, where the Rebbe spoke about the importance of my position. (Interestingly, the Rebbe stressed that we should be very careful not to change any of the customs the shul had before we came, as it was not a Lubavitcher shul.)



A TZACH ANNOUNCEMENT ABOUT THE TZEISCHEM

Over the years, we merited a great deal of encouragement from the Rebbe, who looked after us in every which way. Soon after we arrived, we were suffering from some serious challenges. At one point I concluded that I am no longer capable, and I need to look for another position. But the Rebbe wouldn't hear of it. It is only a result of the Rebbe's encouragement that I stayed put.

L'SHALOM FOR REB ASHER BEFORE HIS DEPARTURE

TO MINNESOTA.

In conclusion, I will share one anecdote that gives a glimpse of what I'm speaking about:

I would send a copy of everything we would publish, including newsletters, community announcements, and articles about Yiddishkeit which we put in the local newspapers, to the Rebbe. On two different occasions, it became clear to me that the Rebbe paid careful attention and reviewed everything.

Once, I prepared a brochure to send out before the *Yomim Noraim*, in which I was inviting unaffiliated Yidden to come to shul for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. A few weeks before Rosh Hashanah I happened to be in New York so I

5726-1966

PIEKARSKI FAMILY



A Q&A SEGMENT ON THE "JEWISH LIFE" TV PROGRAM, HOSTED BY RABBI HENRY OKOLICA IN NEW BRITAIN, CONNECTICUT. L- R RABBIS ASHER ZEILINGOLD, SHMUEL LEW, MEIR GREENBERG, YAAKOV YEHUDA HECHT. SHOLOM BER GORDON, YITZCHAK SCHWARTZ. CIRCA 5722



REB ASHER GIVES A PESACH WORKSHOP. MINNESOTA 5727

submitted a copy to *mazkirus* for the Rebbe to see.

Shortly thereafter, I was notified by one of the *mazkirim* that the Rebbe wanted to see me. This took me by great surprise as being called in to *yechidus* 'out of the blue'—so to speak—was very uncommon. I walked

into the Rebbe's room and noticed my brochure sitting open on the Rebbe's desk right in front of him!

The Rebbe said to me, "I want to tell you something. Since you moved to Minnesota, I have received and read every piece of material you send out. Now, this is the first time you printed ...This Yid should tell his employer that the mayor of S. Paul, George Latimer, who isn't a Yid, has a beard!

something that doesn't have *Baruch Hashem* written on it."

"I want you to know," the Rebbe continued, "that it is very important to start everything you write with *Baruch Hashem*. With this you're acknowledging Hashem, giving you a special *bracha* in what you are doing."

I said to the Rebbe that I will throw out all of these printed brochures and print new ones. The Rebbe said not to do that. Rather, in order to fix this, together with this brochure he suggested that we should send out a *shanah tovah* card and on the card include *Baruch Hashem*.

The second occasion was years later. At one point I was studying Torah with a particular individual who did not consider himself a Lubavitcher Chossid, but he would follow many of our minhagim. This fellow worked as the regional manager for a department store chain, a very prestigious position. At that point in time, this fellow decided to begin growing his beard. However, his employer told him that he must cut it off. He was obviously very disturbed by this and asked me for advice. I said to him, "Look, In a few days I will be traveling to the Rebbe and I will ask him what you should do. However, just to be clear beforehand, I highly doubt the Rebbe will tell you to cut off your beard. On the contrary, I believe that the Rebbe will say that you should keep it." Nevertheless, he agreed.

When I came to New York, I wrote down the whole situation in a letter and gave it in to the Rebbe. The Rebbe

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answered that this Yid should tell his employer that the mayor of S. Paul, George Latimer, who isn't a Yid, has a beard! This fellow indeed brought this point up to his employer and he got his permission to keep his beard.

How did the Rebbe know this? Together with this letter, I gave the Rebbe a stack of printed material, including newspaper clippings. Among them was a clipping from a local newspaper in which there was an article with pictures printed about an event that we held a few months earlier in which the mayor had participated. Of course, the mayor was identified in one of the captions to a photo. This again showed me how carefully the Rebbe reviewed our newsletters, bulletins and newspaper clippings that I had sent in; even the photo captions! 1



THE NEWSPAPER ARTICLE PICTURINGA BEARDED MAYOR LATIMER.

