RABBI KAPALN RECEIVES KOS SHEL BRACHA, MOTZOEI ROSH HASHANAH 5737.

Memories

RABBI NOCHUM KAPLAN'S STORIES FROM 770

Rabbi Nochum Kaplan is a noted Chossid and educator, *menahel* of Vaad Rabbonei Lubavitch, and the director of the Merkos Chinuch office. Rabbi Kaplan merited to spend many years in the Rebbe's presence through his childhood and *bochur* years, and received a significant amount of guidance throughout his years in *chinuch*. He graciously agreed to an interview with *A Chassidisher Derher* to share his memories of growing up near the Rebbe, as a child and a *bochur*, in the *chof* years.

Pioneering Chassidim

I was born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, shortly after the end of World War II. As an infant, my parents and I left Russia on the famous *eshalons*, and spent time in the DP camp in Poking, Germany, and later in Paris, France. From Paris we moved to England and several years later we immigrated to the United States. We arrived in New York on 5 Tammuz 5717 and I saw the Rebbe for the first time during a Maariv that week.

The first farbrengen I attended was a week later, on Yud-Beis Tammuz, held in the *shalash*. The next week our family entered *yechidus* and the Rebbe blessed each of us personally. Although I don't remember many details, I can still see the smiling countenance with which the Rebbe welcomed us.

I enrolled in Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim on Bedford and Dean and joined a unique class along with my brother Leibel, who later went on to become the Rebbe's shliach to Tzfas. Our class had 15 Lubavitcher boys (more than any previous class in New York ever had), all born shortly after the war. We went on to become a pioneering group of Chassidishe *bochurim* in the yeshiva. The *hanhala* treated us as such; for example, as young *bochurim*, Reb Yoel Kahn taught us Chassidus for three consecutive years until we joined the yeshiva in 770 at age 16!

As children, we were impressed with the importance of *valgeren zich tzuvishen Chassidim*, spending time among Chassidim. Our lives outside of yeshiva hours revolved around 770.

We would nudge the *bochurim*, watch the older Chassidim, and find every opportunity to see the Rebbe. If the Rebbe attended a *chupah*, we all attended, regardless of our connection to the families. When the Rebbe would farbreng late into the night, we children would remain until the very end. If we became tired, we would lay down on a pile of coats in the corner.

On Shabbos morning, I would come to 770 as soon as I woke up, even if I had nothing to do there. One such morning in Adar Alef 5718, I was wandering around the *zal* at 8:30 a.m. when the Rebbe suddenly appeared in the doorway of the *zal* and invited everyone into his room for a *maamar*. Only two children were present: Sholom Yisroel Hodakov and myself.

When the elder Chassidim from overseas began to travel to 770 -Reb Nissan Nemanov, Reb Shmerel Sasonkin, Reb Chaim Shaul Bruk we seized the opportunity to spend time with them. Before Tishrei 5721, for example, when the first charter arrived from Eretz Yisrael, we heard about a bus that would be going to the airport to welcome the guests. I don't know if children were invited, but we were determined to join, and we snuck onto the bus at an opportune moment. We relished the opportunity to see and meet an entire new group of Chassidim that came to spend Tishrei with the Rebbe.

Are You So Successful in Learning?

The hobby of the younger children was all around Chassidishe things. I would trade pictures of the Rebbe in my spare time. One day, after our bar mitzvah, a friend and I decided to





THE REBBE VISITS CAMP, SUMMER 5720.

10 SHEVAT 5722.

obtain our own camera to take new, original pictures. In those days, we knew that the Rebbe was not fond of pictures being taken, so we always made sure to turn off the flash.

One day, as the Rebbe returned from a *chupah*, my partner snapped a photo. To our surprise and consternation, the camera flashed. We immediately knew there would be trouble. The Rebbe walked right up to him, and, calling him by his first name, said, *"Gib mir di photo appurat* give me the camera." He handed the camera to the Rebbe. I beat a hasty retreat.

"Du bist azoi matzliach in lernen az du farnemst mit photographye? — Are you so successful in learning that you have time for photography?" the Rebbe asked.

The Rebbe looked around, and Rabbi Tenenbaum—our principal came running over.

"Who is your *melamed*?" the Rebbe asked.

"Rabbi Garfinkel," my friend stammered.

The Rebbe handed the camera to Rabbi Tenenbaum and said, "Find out



from Rabbi Garfinkel if his learning is so successful that he can be involved in photography."

We continued taking pictures afterward—albeit without flash. Many famous pictures, such as the images of the Rebbe in Camp Gan Yisroel in 5720, are from our camera.

After a while, we matured and began to put our efforts into *kesavim* and *hanachos*. We obtained typewriters and copied letters and *reshimos* of the Rebbe and previous Rabbeim. For example, I retyped the entire *lange briv* (written by the Frierdiker Rebbe to Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka). Soon, it was published, and I was disappointed that all my work had been for naught...

Obviously, life in 770 revolved around the Rebbe's farbrengens. Even in our young years, we worked hard to listen and retain the sichos. Reb Yoel would do a chazarah for us on Sunday night in Bedford and Dean. In order to have some background beforehand, we would also listen to the chazarah on Motzei Shabbos. We were also involved in all of the Rebbe's new initiatives. When the Rebbe spoke about shlichus, it was at the forefront of our minds. As kids, we all knew, for example, that Reb Itche Shpringerthen newly married—hadn't even unpacked his suitcase, because he was awaiting instructions to move on shlichus.

The first *maamar* that Reb Yoel had some of us learn by heart was Balayla Hahu 5720, which is a very powerful *maamar*. From then on, we became much more involved. We wrote full *hanachos* of *sichos*, and really got involved in the Rebbe's Torah.

As time went on, the crowds grew and the shalash became too small. On Lag Baomer 5720, the roof of the shalash was taken down and the building of the new shul began. During that period, all the weekday farbrengens moved to halls and Shabbos farbrengens took place in the small zal. It was interesting; when we had arrived in 5717 from England, the back of the zal would be empty during farbrengens, but now every inch was packed. There was no place for the kids. It was so packed that the walls were steaming, and one kid began drawing pictures in the moisture, until someone yelled at him, "Shabbos!"

Then, late in 5720, the new *zal* was ready. It was relatively large, and a large *bima* was installed a few weeks later. But it didn't take long for this *zal* to reach capacity as well. Once, Reb Yochanan Gordon announced, "We are going downstairs to the new, big shul." The Rebbe commented, "*Nei iz dos, uber grois iz dos nisht*—It's new, but it is not big."

A Kuleh

We would often spend time with the older *bochurim* in 770. One Shabbos afternoon, the *bochurim* farbrenged in honor of Reb Eizik Schwei's *ufruf*, and one *bochur* humorously lined up all the empty bottles of *mashke* on a table in the *zal*. As the Rebbe walked in for Mincha, he noticed the bottles and commented with a smile, "A *ponim az m'hot shtark farbracht*—there seems to have been a serious farbrengen."

On another occasion, as *bochurim*, we emerged from a farbrengen in the basement of 749 onto Eastern Parkway

"FIND OUT FROM RABBI GARFINKEL IF HIS LEARNING IS SO SUCCESSFUL THAT HE CAN BE INVOLVED IN PHOTOGRAPHY."



THE REBBE ATTENDS THE CHUPA OF REB GERSHON MENDEL GARELIK.

at three o'clock in the morning. Being in high spirits, one of our friends decided it was time for a *kuleh*. At that very moment, the Rebbe walked out.

One Shabbos afternoon, between Purim and Pesach 5718, my brother Leibel and I were hanging around 770 when we hit upon an idea. We knew the Rebbe liked to open his window for a cool breeze. He would usually open the window behind his desk, where the *aron kodesh* is situated today. In those days, it opened above the staircase to the porch which later became Rabbi Groner's office.

We knew that the Rebbe always kept his shade closed, even when the window was open. But there was the possibility that the wind would push the blinds slightly, and then we would be able to see the Rebbe.

We grabbed a pile of milk-crates and very quietly stacked them onto the staircase. One of us remained on the lookout to ensure no older *bochurim* caught us and the other climbed up and peeked inside. To our surprise, we caught a glimpse of the Rebbe sitting at his desk in a tallis, in front of—what seemed to be—a siddur. It was 3:00 in the afternoon, after a morning Shacharis where we had both clearly seen the Rebbe participate in the *minyan*. He had taken his tzitzis during Shema, done the motions of *oseh shalom* and so on; nonetheless, he was still sitting there in his tallis several hours later.

Pins and Needles

When we learned in Bedford and Dean, we normally didn't have the opportunity to participate in the Rebbe's *minyan* for *krias haTorah* or Mincha, as well as Maariv during the winter, because they fell out during the *sedarim*. But I remember a few occasions where we 'played hooky.'

On 5 Tammuz 5718, Reb Gershon Mendel Garelik got married, and the Rebbe was *mesader kiddushin* at the *chupah* which took place early, at 2:00 in the afternoon. It was the last day of yeshiva and an end-of-year ceremony was planned. We weren't particularly excited about the ceremony and were itching to leave. As 15-year-olds often do, we calculated that being the last day of yeshiva the *hanhala* wouldn't be able to punish us, so we snuck out and attended the *chupah*.

Another similar story:

On the afternoon of 11 Nissan 5722, the Rebbe's sixtieth birthday, we were sitting in the Bedford and Dean *zal* in front of our Shulchan Aruchs on pins and needles. The Rebbe had gone to the Ohel, and we suspected there would be 'action' upon his return. We urgently needed to get to 770.

We approached the Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Bukiet and asked his permission to leave. "Absolutely not!" he replied.

A half hour later, we decided to try again. This time, we tried a different tactic. We 'informed' him, respectfully, that we would be leaving.

"Baruch Hashem!" he responded, to my surprise. "Now I can go as well!"

So we all went to 770. Some time later, the Rebbe returned from the Ohel and we found out that there

L'chaim from The Roof

On Simchas Torah 5719, the Rebbe was holding a farbrengen in the sukkah. The sukkah was packed and it was very hard to get a place close to the Rebbe. We children realized that if we would climb onto the roof of the sukkah, we could be very close to the Rebbe. A few of us clambered onto the roof and then we decided that we should say l'chaim to the Rebbe. One of us obtained a small cup of wine and took the liberty to call out, "L'chaim!" The Rebbe looked up, and noticed us all laying on the roof. He answered the first bochur, and then looked at the next one, "nu..." He said l'chaim to each of us.

would be a farbrengen in honor of Yud-Aleph Nissan.

In the Rebbe's Presence

I merited a total of 20 *yechidusen*. As a *bochur*, the *yechidus* was so overwhelming that I often had difficulty remembering what the Rebbe said.

The first three *yechidusen* were together with my father, but when I turned 14 I began to go in by myself. As children, the Rebbe would often test our learning; I was tested at every *yechidus* until I was 17 years old.

During my bar mitzvah *yechidus*, the Rebbe instructed that I visit the Ohel on the day of the bar mitzvah, and, interestingly, he said that I should not go with my parents. Instead, Reb Berel Futerfas took me on the long ride with public transportation.

"Will you say a *maamar*?" the Rebbe asked at that *yechidus*. "Which *maamar*?"

Memories of Rebbelzin Chana

In Poking, Rebbetzin Chana lived in the room next to ours and we therefore merited to have a lifelong relationship with her.

Two unique memories stick out from my encounters with Rebbetzin Chana:

On the Shabbos after my bar mitzvah, I met Rebbetzin Chana on Kingston Avenue. I wished her good Shabbos and told her about my bar mitzvah, and she wished me well. Then she asked me a question.

"Ir gedenkt epes fun Poking—do you remember anything from Poking?"

I did not.

"Du gedenkst ich hob dir nochgelofen untun dir di yarmulke—do you remember how I chased you to put on your yarmulke?"

She explained that my mother would send me out with a little hat, but I would often tear it off, and she would chase me around to put it back on. She explained why:

איך האב געהערט פון מיין מאן אז א קינד דארף מען נישט ארויסלאזן בגילוי ראש. ער רייסט דאס אפ, טוט מען דאס אן נאכאמאל. דאס איז נוגע צו יראת שמים.

"I heard from my husband that a child should not be let out of the house bareheaded. If he tears off his hat, you put it back on. It impacts his *yiras Shamayim*."

My second memory is from the morning after the Rebbe taught the *niggun* "Shamil" on Simchas Torah 5719. I was 11 years old at the time and it was my first time present when the Rebbe taught a *niggun*. It made a profound impression on me. The Rebbe wept profusely while telling the story and singing the *niggun*, to the extent that I wasn't able to catch on to the tune.

Late the next morning on my way to 770, I met Rebbetzin Chana. "Were you at the *niggun* last night?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"Are you going to shul now? Come, let's go together."

The Rebbetzin asked which *niggun* the Rebbe taught, and I answered, "Shamil."

"What niggun is that?" she asked.

"I don't know who Shamil was and I don't know the *niggun*, but the Rebbe cried a lot."

To my surprise, she entered the men's section of 770 together with me. The Rebbe was in the middle of encouraging the singing of *Sisu Vesiumchu* after *krias haTorah*. Tapping on the shoulder of the person in front of me, I motioned to him to move aside and cleared a path for Rebbetzin Chana to see the Rebbe. Soon, a complete opening was formed. As soon as the Rebbe caught sight of her, he made a slight motion of recognition, and she immediately turned around and left the shul.

At the time, I didn't understand why she came in, but later it dawned on me that I had told her about the Rebbe's profuse sobs. To me, it was a point of the story, but to Rebbetzin Chana, perhaps it was a point of worry, and she wanted to see how the Rebbe was doing.



"YUNGERLEIT VELEN AMOL VEREN ALTELEIT—YOUNG PEOPLE WILL BECOME OLDER PEOPLE ONE DAY AS WELL," THE REBBE TOLD HIM.

"Will you also say a *pilpul*? What will you say?"

I looked at my father. Should I repeat the entire speech?

"The tochen," the Rebbe said.

I said over the points of my *pilpul* and the Rebbe asked several questions. The first question I answered but the second I didn't know.

The Rebbe replied, "If you ask the person who gave you the *pilpul*, he will probably explain it to you…"

A few years later when my birthday was on Friday, the Rebbe instructed me in *yechidus* to recite *Shnayim Mikra* on Friday afternoon, something that I continue to do until this very day.

First Understand the Basics

I enrolled in 770 in 5723 and spent the following years until my wedding in the Rebbe's presence (aside for two years I spent in Eretz Yisrael, as per the Rebbe's instructions).

The *hanhala* would enter the Rebbe's room every Rosh Chodesh with a report and the Rebbe would give instructions pertaining to specific *bochurim*.

For example, at one point my chavrusa became a chosson. In those days, semicha would only be learned once one became a chosson, with permission from hanhala, which meant permission from the Rebbe. During their yechidus, the hanhala asked if my chavrusa should learn Yoreh Deah. Hearing that I was his chavrusa, the Rebbe responded in the negative, because I was not yet a chosson myself. Instead, the Rebbe instructed that we learn Perek Kol Habasar in Chullin which is learnt as a preparation for the laws of *basar bchalav*.

When I did learn Yoreh Deah, the Rebbe gave me an instruction: In order to have a proper background to the siman, I should first learn it in Tur and Beis Yosef before proceeding to the Mechaber. My brother Leibel had a similar directive: The Rebbe told him to first learn and review the siman with the Mechaber, Mapah (Rema), and Baer Heitev for a basic understanding of the concepts and only afterwards to proceed to Shach and Taz. This was a general rule in the Rebbe's learning directives: first become fluent in the general idea and then proceed with the details.

Rebbetzin Chana's Shivah

During the *shivah* of Rebbetzin Chana, we divided *mishmaros* to participate in the *tefillos*, and we also divided the hours to manage the door—to greet people who came to be *menachem avel* and to ensure that everything ran smoothly. During my shift (on the morning of Erev Yom Kippur, just before the Rebbe got up from *shivah*), I was posted inside the room where the Rebbe sat and my job was to open the door whenever I heard a knock from the *bochur* outside, who would welcome the guests in.

We heard that the Satmar Rebbe, Reb Yoel Teitelbaum would be coming. When I opened the door, I saw that he came with a huge entourage. I decided that I would close the door as soon as he and his *gabbai* entered. I waited for him to pass through, but instead of closing the door, I was pinned behind it until his entire entourage entered. Only afterwards was I able to emerge...

It wasn't a long visit. The Rebbe spoke with him regarding *mikveh* on Erev Yom Kippur, and the main part of the conversation dwelled on that. It was quite evident from the Satmar Rebbe's demeanor that he came with a great *hadras kavod* for the Rebbe.

Another group of visitors were relatives of the Rebbe, from the Lavut family, who lived in Montreal. They were modern Jews and we had never seen them in 770. From my post at the door, I heard several snippets of their conversation.

One of them said to the Rebbe, "I thought you were surrounded by old people, but I look around and everybody here is young..."

The Rebbe smiled broadly. It was clear that he took immense pride in the compliment. "*Yungerleit velen amol veren alteleit*—young people will become older people one day as well," the Rebbe told him.

Rabbi Hodakov

About 20 groups would go out each year on Merkos Shlichus. After receiving *reshus* from Rabbi Hodakov, we would unfurl a map of the United States and 'divide and conquer.' Rabbi Hodakov was very involved and he wanted detailed reports. One time, the Rebbe sent out a specific report and asked that all the *bochurim* read it. *"Dos iz a duch lemoifes*—this is an example of an excellent report."

It wasn't a 'free for all.' Rabbi Hodakov made it clear to us that a *bochur* is always in the *reshus* of the *hanhala*, even when he is not in yeshiva. Every morning during our travels, we were to wake up early for Chassidus, and only after Shacharis were we to visit people. If we ever needed to take a propellor plane, which we knew the Rebbe wasn't so



Not For a Tomim

One Purim, we went on *mivtzoim* to an army base in South Carolina. During our visit, after a few *lchaims*, a soldier and I took a humorous picture with us switching clothes: he put on my hat and jacket, and I donned his army uniform. He offered me his gun as well and we snapped the photo.

After our trip, someone sent in all the pictures to the Rebbe. I was soon called to Rabbi Hodakov's office. "The Rebbe wants to know, *vi kumt tzu a Tomim a klei mashchis*—why was a Tomim holding an instrument of destruction."

fond of, we had to call Rabbi Hodakov for permission.

It was difficult traveling. We brought along sardines, and we would search the local stores for matzah. Sometimes we would even find a prized jar of gefilte fish. We often lived for days on end on vegetables.

In addition to this, I had a personal relationship with Rabbi Hodakov. After Merkos Shlichus, he would call me in and grill me with questions regarding my trip. Sometimes he would press a button, and I understood that the Rebbe might be listening in. He would occasionally call us during the year also for some mission or another, but still, he was very distant; he never acted as our friend.

Before Pesach 5727, Rabbi Hodakov instructed myself and Yisroel Shmotkin (now the Rebbe's shliach to Wisconsin) to arrange a kinus Torah on Chol Hamoed, with bochurim from Torah Vodaas, Chaim Berlin, and so on. We did so. On Acharon Shel Pesach at the farbrengen, I raised my cup to say l'chaim to the Rebbe for a cousin of mine who needed a refuah sheleima. The Rebbe responded, "Un far dir alein—for yourself too," and motioned that I say l'chaim on a full cup of wine. Then, the Rebbe turned to Yisroel Shmotkin and gave him the same instruction.

That year, Lag Baomer occurred on Sunday and I was one of the organizers of the parade. On Shabbos afternoon, about an hour before Maariv, we had a meeting with all the volunteers in the *ezras nashim* (now Rabbi Groner's office) and I was laying out the schedule to about 50 *bochurim*. Suddenly, Rabbi Hodakov appeared at the door (which led to *Gan Eden Hatachton*). *"Ich ken hoben reshus hadibur*—can I speak for a moment?" he said. Of course, I stepped aside and he said the following:

"Der Rebbe hot gebetten ibergeben az mezol gedenken di groise achrayus vos m'trogt, un loit di groise achrayus is oich aza groiser zechus. — The Rebbe asked me to convey that you should remember the significance of the responsibility you carry, and that the merit is commensurate to the responsibility."

On another occasion, Rabbi Hodakov asked me what we were doing for our non-Lubavitcher classmates from Bedford and Dean. He told us to arrange an alumni gathering. The Shabbos after our event, the Rebbe mentioned it at the farbrengen.

I once came to 770 from my shlichus in Norfolk, Virginia, with an important question about an idea I had. I gave my letter to Rabbi Hodakov on Friday morning and on Friday night, as he passed me he asked, "Did you receive the answer?"

I didn't understand—he hadn't given me any answer.

"Nit kein entfer iz oich an entfer—no answer is also an answer," he said. *"And sometimes the proposal is worthy, but the time hasn't come yet for it."*

Engagement

On the Shabbos after I got engaged, I went over with a bottle of *mashke* at the farbrengen to receive *lchaim* from the Rebbe as the custom was in those years. The Rebbe asked me when the *vort* would take place, and then added, *"Mistame vestu chazeren a maamar* you will probably recite a *maamar.*"

I nodded my head, and the Rebbe added.

"Mistame vestu chazeren an inyan in nigleh oich—you will probably recite a concept in nigleh as well."

I had my orders.

The following Thursday night we went into *yechidus*. The Rebbe asked, "Which *maamar* did you recite?"

I replied that I had said the *maamar* of the previous Shabbos. The Rebbe seemed pleased.

"Did you also say something in *nigleh*?"

"I started, but they sang over me." "*Aza batlan*," the Rebbe responded.

A few days after my wedding, I received a message that Rabbi Hodakov was trying to contact me. I didn't have a telephone yet, so I went to my father's house to call him. He said that I should come to Mincha.

"Do you *chazer maamarim* at the *sheva brachos*?" he asked me after Mincha. I answered yes.

"The Rebbe said that you owe him an *inyan* in *nigleh*," he told me after Mincha. "Make sure to do so at your *sheva brachos*."

Five Minules Late

I was part of one of the earliest groups of *kolel yungerleit*. At the outset, we were told to learn in the *veiber shul*, but space was very tight. I asked Rabbi Hodakov if we could use the house behind 770 that had recently been purchased by the Rebbe. The next day, Rabbi Hodakov approved of the idea, and the *kolel* moved into the house.

After Mincha some two weeks later, I spent a few minutes talking to friends in 770 and then made my way through the courtyard towards the *kolel*. To my shock and surprise, I saw the Rebbe approaching me from the direction of the *kolel*. I quickly moved aside and the Rebbe gave me a sharp look as he passed by. As soon as the Rebbe was out of sight, I raced to the *kolel*.

"What happened?"

Immediately after Mincha, the Rebbe had walked over to the *Kolel*. Only a few *yungerleit* had been there during the Rebbe's visit. One fellow was wearing tallis and tefillin, and others were loitering around. The Rebbe had surprised them. He made a quick circle around the room, took



in everything that was going on, and quickly made his exit.

We were certain that the Rebbe wasn't pleased with what he saw, and we expected immediate 'fireworks.' Less than five minutes later, Rabbi Klein came into the *kolel*. "Rabbi Hodakov would like to speak to all the *kolel yungerleit*."

"The Rebbe has several comments," Rabbi Hodakov told us in his office. "First of all, why weren't you all present and learning immediately after Mincha? Why were you late?"

He then turned to me and added, "The Rebbe said to tell Kaplan that five minutes is also late..."

The Rebbe was also displeased to see that those who were present were all learning different subjects, and that there were not enough *sefarim* for reference. From then on, we were obligated to present a monthly report to Rabbi Hodakov, and only then were we given our \$72 allowance.

The Arum

When thinking back to my years as a child and young *bochur* in the Rebbe's presence, it is very clear to me that everything I merited to see and to gain came as a result of being present. In other words, had I had numerous other distractions, like sports, gadgets and entertainment, I would have missed out immensely.

The same holds true for our day and age. For a child to become permeated with Chassidishe *hanachos* and Chassidishe values, he needs to be present. It is very important for parents and educators to create a space where their children can soak in *Chassidishkeit* without any outside distractions. And it is important for children and young *bochurim* themselves to seek every opportunity to spend time with Chassidim and soak in their presence.

Sometimes it could seem difficult, but the rewards are endless. **1**