

CONQUERING CALIFORNIA

אינעמען גאנץ קאליפארניא!

Interview with
RABBI SHLOMO CUNIN





Chassidisher Derher: Good afternoon Rabbi Cunin, thank you for giving us from your time today.

Rabbi Cunin: It is my pleasure to dedicate time toward a magazine geared for bochurim. Being just a short while after Gimmel Tammuz, it is vital that bochurim bear in mind that the Rebbe is with every one of us, giving us the strength to persevere until the end.

The Rebbe gave us tools to help internalize this energy, namely: the shiurim of Chitas, Rambam and going on Mivtzoim. Following these *hora'os* enables us to feel the Rebbe's *koach*, even when we are not physically near the Ohel.

You may ask: how can I be so confident in these words?

I will share with you a story that took place with me just a few hours ago that shows how vividly we can witness the Rebbe's influence in everything we do, so long as we adhere to the Rebbe's *takanos* and *hora'os*:

I had the opportunity to visit a group of lawyers on the 32nd floor of an office building in Los Angeles this morning. Upon arrival, I turned to one of the lawyers who was Jewish, yet very secular, and I asked him to put on Tefillin. To my surprise, he replied: "Rabbi Cunin, ever since you first met me a few months ago and asked me to put on Tefillin, something stirred within me. Shortly thereafter I found my old pair of Tefillin and began putting them on every day."

Instead of being bashful the first time I met him, I had pushed myself to immediately ask him about the Rebbe's Mivtza Tefillin. I saw the Rebbe's *kochos* vividly, for the man was totally transformed - *nishapech l'ish acher!*

Every bochur receives endless care from the Rebbe, he must merely tap into it by learning Chitas and Rambam, amongst the other things the Rebbe has instructed us to do.

cd: This *hartzike* message will undoubtedly have an impact on the bochurim reading this publication. Can



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RABBI CUNIN RECEIVES KOS SHEL BROCHA FROM THE REBBE ON 24 TISHREI 5748.

you tell us about your childhood, and the interactions with the Rebbe you had during those years?

rc: Boruch Hashem, I was fortunate to have been raised in the Bronx, which was relatively close to Crown Heights. Though it was quite rare to see a Chossid with a beard in America during those days, I was fortunate that both of my Zeides were fiery Chassidim, who were also very involved in my Chinuch.

When my brother and I were old enough to go to Cheder, my Zeides visited a Yeshiva nearby to see whether we should attend. After witnessing less than desirable character traits displayed by one of the teachers, they concluded that it would be better for my Yiddishkeit to not attend the school. Instead, they arranged for Rabbi Sholom Mendel Simpson – a bochur at the time – to teach us privately. When I turned eleven, my family had a Yechidus with the Rebbe. During that

Yechidus, the Rebbe told my parents that it was time for my brother and me to join the Lubavitcher Yeshiva on Bedford and Dean. Upon hearing the suggestion, my mother began to weep. The Rebbe soothed her, explaining that we would not be away for the entire week; we would come home every Shabbos. At the start of *shnas halimudim* of 5712, my brother Pinchos and I joined the Lubavitcher Yeshiva.

Many years later, I found a trove of letters between the Rebbe and my mother, which I had no clue about until then. I learned from them that the Rebbe had guided my mother like a *tatte* after her family had perished in the Holocaust. The Rebbe directed her in all sorts of situations, even things as minor as us having a cold!

We also visited the Yeshiva in advance, as per the Rebbe's instruction. The Yeshiva was exceedingly clean, and appealing. Later on I found out that the Rebbe had instructed the Yeshiva to make sure they

go out of their way to make sure my mother was comfortable with every detail of the conditions, so as not to give her any additional worries!

There is a lifelong message I learned from my parents. While other Chassidim were very focused on taking in as much as they could from the Rebbe, my father would go to extreme lengths to make sure that the Rebbe's needs were taken care of. He would constantly give of his resources to make sure the Rebbe had *harchova* in all matters.

cd: Can you tell us about some of the interactions you had with the Rebbe as a bochur?

rc: Throughout my years as a bochur in 770, I was privileged to have many, many encounters with the Rebbe. I will share a few of them with you.

Perhaps the first Shlichus I received from the Rebbe, was as a young bochur. It was erev Pesach, and the Rebbe would

distribute Matza to the Chassidim. Being that I had an hour train ride from Crown Heights to the Bronx, I was able to be one of the first to receive Matza from the Rebbe.

When I came by the Rebbe, the Rebbe gave me Matza, and then the Rebbe asked me whether I lived in the Bronx, and I confirmed that I did. The Rebbe then gave me another large piece of Matza and asked me to please deliver it to an address in the Bronx that the Mazkirus would supply me with.

I was elated! I was overjoyed to be trusted with the Rebbe's Shlichus.

I hurried to the Mazkirus and got the address, and realized that it was on the opposite side of the Bronx, meaning that it would take a lot longer than I had planned. So I stopped to call my mother and let her know that she should not get worried if I don't make it home in time for Yomtov.

To make matters worse, my train was delayed, so upon arrival in that part of the Bronx I emptied the muktze from my pockets in the subway station, and asked a passerby how I could get to that address. They explained to me that it was a very long walk.

At last, I arrived at the address, and realized it was located in a community for the blind. I climbed up to the third floor apartment and knocked on the door. "Who's there?" shouted a voice from behind the door. "An emissary of the Lubavitcher Rebbe," I replied.

A shirtless, tattooed, heavysset man opened the door, bringing the smell of *treife* food wafting to my nose. It was definitely not your average Pesach scene! I wondered why the Rebbe sent me there...

"So the Rebbe sent you to me? I'm so excited!" exclaimed the man.

He invited me into the apartment and asked me why I had come. I explained to him that I had a special delivery from the Rebbe from him. But first, I asked him to take a tablecloth and cover the *treife* food on the table.

I had him take out brand new cups, and filled them with water. I asked him to gather his wife and children and we sat together in the living room. I realized that both of the children were blind.

Over four cups of water, I told the story of Yetzi'as Mitzrayim, and then had them wash for Motzi-Matza. Then they all had a piece of the Rebbe's Matza, the first time eating Matza in their lifetime!

After spending a while there, I hesitantly asked him if he could share his story with me, so I could share it with the Rebbe.

The man obliged and filled me in on his connection with the Rebbe.

A shirtless, tattooed, heavysset man opened the door, bringing the smell of *treife* food wafting to my nose.

He was a tanner who worked in a kosher slaughter house, run by a group of Lubavitcher Chassidim. Recently they had noticed that he had seemed very depressed. They pressed him to share his problem with them. He explained that after his first two children were born blind, the doctors warned him not to have any more children, because chances were that they too would be blind.

But alas, his wife was now expecting another child, and he was at a complete loss what to do. The doctors felt strongly that the baby should be aborted, because statistics suggested that the baby would be blind. However he felt that since there was a chance that the baby would be able to see, it would be heinous for him not to have brought this life into the world. He felt terribly confused as how to behave.

Upon hearing his story the Chassidim urged that he write to the Rebbe and ask for a brocha. He resisted, claiming that he was completely secular. Eventually the Chassidim prevailed upon him and he wrote a letter to the Rebbe, pouring out his woes.

He was delighted when shortly thereafter he received a reply from the Rebbe. The Rebbe's answer was clear: "Don't have an abortion! I bless you that the baby will be able to see, and you will have much nachas from this child, as well as the other children." The Rebbe also encouraged him to strengthen his involvement in Torah and Mitzvos. The Rebbe concluded that he would send an emissary to help them along this path.

You can well understand that I was astounded upon hearing this story. At this point the man had tears streaming down his face. I told him that this Matza was

"bread of healing" and it would bring great brocha to his entire family.

A short while later I was informed that the baby was in fact born, with both eyes functioning!

The shoachim

whom he worked with arranged a Bris Mila for the little boy.

For years I stayed in touch with the children, and many years down the line they grew closer to their Yiddishkeit.

Another *kiruv* I received from the Rebbe took place after an interesting sequence of events. It was a regular day in 770, and I was sitting and learning in the zal on the first floor of 770. Suddenly Rabbi Hodakov entered the Zal and came over to where I was sitting.

He explained that a group of wealthy and influential individuals had come to have a Yechidus with the Rebbe en route to visit the sites of concentration camps in Europe. Arriving at the same time as them was a young "hippie," searching for counsel.

The first question that I recall, was “How did G-d let the Holocaust happen?”

The Rebbe had chosen to give a Yechidus to the young “hippie” first and the other group was waiting for a while. Rabbi Hodakov asked if I could spend time with the group while they waited for the Rebbe, as I was a born and bred American who spoke fluent English.

I readily agreed, and led them to the library, where I *schmoozed* with them on a variety of Jewish subjects. After over an hour the Rebbe buzzed Rabbi Hodakov to inform him that he was ready for the group. The Rebbe then told Rabbi Hodakov:

”מ'דאָרף עס געבען א שוכר, ער האט דאך
געזעצטן מיט זיי די גאנצען צייט. זאל ער אויכעט
אריינגייען מיט זיי.”

“We need to give him [Shlomo Cunin] a reward, as he sat with them the entire time. He should enter [the Yechidus] with them.”

I was ecstatic that I had merited this incredible *zechus*. During the Yechidus the group posed a number of questions to the Rebbe, particularly regarding the Holocaust. Throughout the entire Yechidus the Rebbe spoke only in English.

The first question that I recall, was “How did G-d let the Holocaust happen?”

The Rebbe replied: “I cannot rationalize why G-d allowed things to happen. The only thing I can be sure of, is that Hitler *yemach shemo*, as well as any other evil person, cannot destroy our people. Only we can destroy ourselves.

“You must educate your children about Shabbos and the commandments of

the Almighty. Through educating your children as Jews, and educating yourself the same way, you can ensure that the Jewish people will never be destroyed.”

ed: You mentioned earlier how your father would be very worried about the Rebbe's material state of affairs. I heard that as a bochur, you also were involved in similar matters. Can you share some of those with us?

rc: It bothered me greatly if something wasn't ideal with the Rebbe's *gashmiyus*. I decided to make sure to be there whenever the Rebbe would come in and out of 770, so I could hold the door open. The Rebbe, who cares for the entire *Klal Yisroel* shouldn't need to hold the door open for himself! After a while, it caught on and others began to do the same.

Until the year 5725, the Rebbe would almost always walk to and from his home to 770. Crown Heights wasn't such a safe place and the Rebbe would walk alone, often at late hours of the night. I decided, together with another few other bochorim, to make a rotation of following the Rebbe to and from his home. Reb Berel Lipsker, Reb Avremel Lipsker, Reb Shmerel Roitblat and Reb Zisel Piekarski were from the first ones to take part in this.

We armed ourselves with clubs during the week, and for Shabbos we wore specially sharpened garrison belts (commonly used by police officers). We kept a distance between ourselves with the Rebbe, and we hoped that the Rebbe was happy with what we were doing.

To our great surprise, one day one of us got a call on the payphone in 770, and the lady on the line introduced herself simply as “Schneerson from President St.” It was the Rebbetzin calling! She thanked us for walking behind the Rebbe and then she finished:

”איך בעט איר זאלט נישט זיין אזעלכע גרויסע
חסידים, איר זאלט שטייען א ביסעל נענטער.”

“I ask of you that [in this matter] you shouldn't be such “great Chassidim,” [and] please stand a little closer [to the Rebbe].”

We were stunned by the realization of how dearly the Rebbetzin held this. Understandably we stepped up our efforts greatly after that phone call.

When the winter came, I didn't want the Rebbe to have to walk in the snow and ice, so I got a group of friends together and we would shovel a path from the Rebbe's house, all the way to 770! After a while, my *chaver* Berel Baumgarten a”h, and I put together enough money to buy an electric snow blower, and we would plow the areas where the Rebbe would walk.

One night there was a terrible snowstorm and I was plowing the area right in front of 770, however it kept getting full of snow because the snow was coming down hard. Suddenly the lights in the Rebbe's room turned off, which meant that the Rebbe would be coming outside in just a few moments.

Not wanting the Rebbe to see me, I pushed the snow blower in the direction of the *chotzer*,¹ and jumped into the one of the snowbanks near the door. A moment later the Rebbe exited 770 and realized exactly what had happened. This I will never forget – the Rebbe looked down at me in the snowbank and gave me a broad smile, one that resounds within me till now.

In the earlier years, no one was printing the Rebbe's *bilti-mugah*² maamorim, and therefore few were *chazzering* these maamorim in the Shuls. At first I procured a typewriter and onion paper,³ which would produce 22 copies. Reb Boruch Shalom Kahn (today of New Haven, CT) would type out the maamorim and I would take care of the distribution.

Later on I upgraded to a mimeograph machine, and then to a spirit duplicator, which used alcohol to print multiple copies. After amassing enough funds I even invested in a proper copy machine which enabled many more copies to be printed and spread. Eventually Reb Dovid Raskin took charge of this, taking the *hafotza* to greater heights.

I was quite involved in secretly⁴ recording the Rebbe's farbrengens, and Boruch Hashem those recordings bring *chizuk* to the Chassidim nowadays.

cd: Speaking of the Rebbe during the winter, I have heard that you were involved in the building of a structure for the Rebbe to stand in when he visited the Ohel. Can you tell us about it?

rc: This was an intense saga that I was involved in as a bochur.

In the early 5710's the Rebbe would bring small packages of *tzetlach* that people had sent in with him to the Ohel. The Rebbe would rest these bags on the partition that surrounded the Frierdiker Rebbes tzivon. However, the wall was only about eight inches wide.

As the packages the Rebbe brought grew bigger, I felt that something had to be done to make it more convenient for the Rebbe. I was caught in a struggle, because

doing something inside the Ohel is like playing with fire! For a chossid to begin doing things inside the Ohel, seemed totally out of place.

Eventually I could not take the Rebbe's discomfort any longer, and together with my friend Avremel Lipsker, I cut out a board of wood for the Rebbe to put things down on while at the Ohel. We clamped it onto the wall, and placed hooks in front of it for the Rebbe to hang bags of *tzetlach*. We felt like we were taking our lives into our hands!

With great nervousness, we watched from afar the next time the Rebbe came to the Ohel. We were thrilled when the Rebbe came in and made use of the board and the hooks, as if they had always been there!

When the need arose, we replaced the board with a bigger one, to give more space for whatever the Rebbe wanted to put down.

A short while later I had an opportunity to be at the Ohel when the Rebbe was there. It was a freezing day and I noticed that the Rebbe's feet were surrounded by ice water. For hours on end the Rebbe stood at the Ohel totally exposed to the elements.

My friend Avremel Lipsker and I decided that we could handle this no more. Out of pieces of wood, we built a platform for the Rebbe to stand on. With trepidation we brought the platform to the Ohel, and hoped that we were doing the proper thing.

This time when the Rebbe arrived at the Ohel, we looked on as the Rebbe approached the platform, and stepped up onto it without hesitation. We felt relieved.

Realizing that the Rebbe had accepted our efforts, I got more daring and brought in a "construction stove" on the right side of the platform, which was connected to a



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Rabbi Cunin relates:

"The Rebbe's Mazkir Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky, who now also serves as the Chairman of Merkos L'yonei Chinuch, would usually drive the Rebbe to and from the Ohel.

One wintry day, Rabbi Krinsky was not able to drive the Rebbe, so another individual drove instead. I had also come to the Ohel that day, in order to make sure that the propane tank was connected correctly to the stove.

The Rebbe stood inside the Ohel, but snow began to come down very strong. Although the driver had opened an umbrella for the Rebbe (as Rabbi Krinsky often would in similar situations), this time the Rebbe chose to instead stand under the overhang which protrudes over the left side of the Ohel.

However, because the Rebbe was no longer standing on the board, ice water began to gather around the Rebbe's feet. My heart raced as I debated what to do. I couldn't handle the *tzaar* that the Rebbe was no-doubt experiencing.

Cautiously I stepped into the Ohel and passed behind the Rebbe. The Rebbe remained fixed to his spot, as if he hadn't noticed me. My heart pounding, I asked the Rebbe:

"דער רבי שטייט אין אייז-וואסער, און איך וויל צושטעלען דעם ברעטעל?"

"The Rebbe is standing in ice-water, I would like to set up the board?"

Suddenly the Rebbe stepped back, as if noticing me for the first time, and moved as if to allow me to bring the board. Swiftly, I lifted the board from where it usually stood and moved it to where the Rebbe was standing."



RABBI CUNIN PRESENTS THE REBBE WITH A KEY TO A NEW CHABAD HOUSE IN CALIFORNIA.



RABBI CUNIN AT THE FIRST TELETHON.

PHOTO: JEW THE LIVING ARCHIVE / 705236

Persistently he asked, do I think a bochur could be successful in such a Shlichus, to which I replied that if it's the Rebbe's desire he surely can.

He concluded, that if so he suggests that I begin to get involved in Shlichus in the Bronx. I answered, that if the Rebbe wants then I am ready to go. Rabbi Hodakov instructed me to ask *reshus* from the Hanhala, which I immediately set about doing.

Rabbi Mentlik's⁵ answer was clear: if the Rebbe wanted, then the Hanhala gives full *reshus*.

Once I had relayed the message to Rabbi Hodakov, he outlined to me, that the Rebbe wanted me to be in Yeshiva during the week and to be involved in Shlichus in the Bronx from Friday until Sunday.

I acquired an army surplus bus for \$100 and installed shelves and furniture inside. I called it the "Merkaz Bus," but essentially this was the first Mitzvah Tank.

Each Friday morning I would park outside the Reform and Conservative temples, and hold book fairs inside this bus, so people would have the opportunity to taste authentic Yiddishkeit. I would spend Shabbos in the Bronx, and then continue holding book fairs all Sunday. On Monday morning I would immediately return to regular *seder hayeshiva*.

cd: When did you begin your Shlichus in California?

rc: That began a few months after my wedding. I got married to Rebbetzin Sheindel Cunin on Yud Daled Kislev, 5725.

Following my chasuna I received a *hora'ò* from the Rebbe to learn in Kollel for the first half of the day, and for the second half to continue my Shlichus in the Bronx.

After Pesach I had the tremendous *zechus* of being sent by the Rebbe to California as the fifth Shliach of the Rebbe in the USA.⁶

My wife and I had a special Yechidus

with the Rebbe prior to our departure to California. During that Yechidus the Rebbe gave me a Tanya, and my wife a Siddur. One of the things the Rebbe told me during that Yechidus was:

"זאלסט אײנעמען גאנץ קליפורניא!"

"You should conquer the entire California!"

This has been our motto in every matter, and Boruch Hashem today our headquarters at 741 Gayley Ave. has become the "command center" for the over 240 Chabad Houses!

Boruch Hashem, we were *zoche* to pioneer many things throughout my shlichus, including the first Sukkah Mobile, the first Chabad day camp and the first Chabad House, amongst many other firsts.

Despite being physically distanced from the Rebbe, I learned from my mentor Reb Gershon Mendel Garelick, that traveling to the Rebbe – *es iz nisht do farvos tzu moire hoben*. Every Shabbos Mevorchim I would fly – and continue to do so – to New York to spend Shabbos with the Rebbe, and often on other days as well.

cd: Did you receive *hora'òs* from the Rebbe regarding Shlichus matters?

rc: Oh yes! I was *zoche* to receive many, many *hora'òs* from the Rebbe throughout all the years of my Shlichus, and I will try to share some of them with you.

As a matter of fact one of the first *hora'òs* on Shlichus was regarding *Shliach ose Shliach* [bringing down a new Shliach]. Boruch Hashem, our Shlichus started off with a roar, and I saw much *hatzlocha*. I realized that I needed to bring down another Shliach to work together with me.

The next time I was in Yechidus, I included in my *tzetel* an inquiry about bringing down a new Shliach. I also included three suggestions of possible candidates.

The first was a personal friend of mine Reb Hirshel Hecht. He was originally from Chicago and was stationed in Tzfas, Eretz Yisroel at the time.

propane tank. The stove emitted warmth, and was designed for outdoor use. When the Rebbe came to the Ohel the following time, the Rebbe stepped up onto the platform and stood very close to the oven, which provided me with a distinct sense of relief.

With time, we built a booth to protect the Rebbe from the rain and snow, and eventually a full structure was built for the Rebbe.

Shortly after Chof Zayin Adar 5752, the entire structure mysteriously burst into flames and almost nothing survived the *sreifa!*

cd: Were you involved in Shlichus in other areas besides California?

rc: I was sent on Shlichus, even before my chasuna!

As an older bochur in 770, I was once called in by Rabbi Hodakov and he asked me whether the Bronx could have a Shliach. I answered, that if the Rebbe wants, surely there can be a Shliach there.

The Rebbe read through my *tzettel*, and when it came to the first candidate the Rebbe questioned; “Harry?” “Hirshel,” I replied. “Doesn’t he live in Eretz Yisroel?” asked the Rebbe. I realized immediately that the Rebbe was hinting that if he lived in Eretz Yisroel already, then he shouldn’t leave.

The Rebbe then addressed the second individual I had mentioned, Rabbi Avrohom Levitansky a”h:

“איך וויל דיר זאגען ווי מ’דארף קלייבען א שליח.
די ערשטע זאך דארף מען וויסען צי ער פלעגט
פארן אויף ‘מיטוואך שעה’.
ער פלעגט גייען.

שפעטער דארף מען וויסען צי בשעת ס’האט
ג’ענדיקט זיך די לערנען מיט די קינדער, צי ער
איז געבליבען רעדען מיט די קינדער און זייער
עלטערן.

ער פלעגט בלייבען.

מען דארף וויסען זיין ווער ער איז, מען דארף
וויסען זיין ווער איז די ווייב, און ווער זיינען די
עלטערען.

און מ’דארף וויסען זיין אז קיינער טוט אונז קיין
טובות נישט.”

“I want to tell you how you must choose a Shliach. The first thing you should look into, is whether he would participate in ‘Wednesday hour [Released Time].”

“[The Rebbe answered his own question] He would.

“Afterward, you need to know whether after [the Wednesday hour] had ended, he would leave right away, or he would stay late to speak with the children and their parents.

“[The Rebbe answered his own question] He would stay.

“You need to find out who he is, who is wife is, and who are their parents.

“And you need to know, that we don’t need people to do us favors [in regard to going on Shlichus].”

Shortly thereafter the Rebbe gave me a brocha to bring down Rabbi Levitansky, who dedicated himself to his Shlichus until his last days.

The summer after Rabbi Levitansky

arrived we opened the first Chabad day camp. We designed a brochure and submitted it to the Rebbe.

We were startled when we saw the Rebbe’s one word reply: תערוכות?

On the cover was a picture of boys and girls jumping rope together. The Rebbe’s reply made it clear that not only was the illustration not proper, but that we should have separate divisions for boys and girls.

This reminds me of another occasion when an ad was made about *Mivtza Taharas Hamishpocha* by one of the Shluchim in California. At around three o’clock in the morning my phone began ringing (bear in mind that this is 6 a.m. in New York). Rabbi Hodakov was on the line!

Rabbi Hodakov told me that he saw the ad, and because a certain kind of wording was used in the ad, it was not proper for us to run it. Not being used to receiving calls from Rabbi Hodakov,⁸ I began to explain to him that the reason that kind of language was used was because “Californians” would better receive it.

After a while of arguing, Rabbi Hodakov exclaimed:

“You might think that I am telling you this because I am an old fashioned Jew. However, I want you to know that I had the *zechus* of being with the Rebbe today and this is what the Rebbe says.”

Stunned, I immediately saw to it that the ad cease circulation.

cd: Did the Rebbe give any *hora’os* regarding the opening of the first Chabad House?

rc: Absolutely! But first you must know the background behind its opening.

Soon after I had arrived in California, I set my eyes on procuring a facility for our activities. My first idea was to buy a Shul, especially because there was one that was available for sale, ran by Rabbi Tarshish. When I asked the Rebbe about purchasing the Shul, the Rebbe asked me: How will it support itself?

Now, when the Rebbe says no, that’s because the Rebbe has his own reasons.

Often, however the Rebbe tries to give us something in *darchei hateva* that can help us understand. So when the Rebbe asked that question, I realized that it was merely a hint that the Rebbe didn’t want us to open a Shul at that point.

A short while later I came back to the Rebbe with another idea. There was a building with a pool that was available for just \$100,000. We would then offer “Talmud Torah and Swimming.” Parents would drop off their children each day for a few hours, part of which the children could swim in the pool, and the rest of the time would be dedicated to learning Torah.

This venture could also be financially stable, since the parents would pay to enroll their children into the program.

This time the Rebbe answered me:

“שלמה, וואס וועלן זיי זאגען, ס’איז געקומען א יונגער שליח דא אין קליפורניה, קאמ דא אזויפיל חדשים, און אויסגעגעבען הונדערט טויזענט דולר?!”

“Shlomo, what will they say, a young Shliach arrived in California, merely here for a couple of months, and he has already spend \$100,000?!”

I understood that the Rebbe was not happy with the idea. In the meantime I threw myself in to expanding the activities of Chabad on the West Coast.

A great focus of my Shlichus was with Jewish college students at UCLA in Westwood, California. After realizing that their children were developing a strong connection, the parents of these students approached me and offered to help purchase a facility.

Here again I approached the Rebbe with the idea. Since this would be a place for the Jewish students on campus to “come home” to, we would call it Chabad House.

I was ecstatic when the Rebbe gave me a brocha to pursue this idea.

cd: When was the building completed?

rc: The completion of the building took place shortly before Yud Alef Nissan 5730. I made a special trip to New York



AFTER THE ORIGINAL CHABAD HOUSE SUFFERED THROUGH A TERRIBLE BLAZE, THIS EVENT WAS HELD RIGHT IN FRONT OF IT.



RABBI CUNIN LIGHTS THE MENORAH AT AN EVENT TOGETHER WITH GOVERNOR ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER.

with the key in order to present it to the Rebbe in Yechidus, together with some supporters.

In advance of my Yechidus, Rabbi Hodakov informed me that the Rebbe had instructed to bring a photographer to capture the moment of the presentation of the key to the first Chabad House.

Hastily, I arranged for a photographer to be present.

A glow of *nachas ruach* emanated from the Rebbe's face when we presented the key. Then the Rebbe asked me: "Which Chabad House is this the key to?"

Speechless, I realized that the Rebbe was clearly implying that this Chabad House should be the first of many.

Similarly, with the opening of every subsequent Chabad House, I would have a Yechidus together with the Shliach in that location and present the Rebbe with the key.

When we opened the Chabad House in S. Diego together with Rabbi Yonah Fradkin, we presented a key to the city, framed in a gift box adorned with a plaque.

We entered the Rebbe's room and presented it to the Rebbe. The Rebbe responded to me:

איך קען עס ביי דיר ניט נעמען שלמה... דו האסט געשריבען סאן דיעגו.

"I can't take it from you Shlomo... you wrote San^o Diego."

I cringed inside, grasping that I had made a big mistake.

The Rebbe turned to Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky who was in the room at the time as well, and asked him to bring scotch tape. The Rebbe tore little bits of paper and, with the scotch tape, covered over the letters "a" and "n."

"Now, I can accept it from you," concluded the Rebbe, smiling broadly.

From that day forward, any location in California that begins with that word, is spelled out by the Shluchim and Anash simply as S., e.g. S. Diego, S. Francisco etc.

This reminds me about the time just two years later that propelled a major leap forward for Chabad of California.

Lubavitch was buzzing with excitement in anticipation of the Rebbe's seventieth birthday on Yud Alef Nissan 5732. I myself brought a few supporters of Chabad of California to the Rebbe's Farbrengen that Yud Alef Nissan.

The Rebbe expressed during that Farbrengen that if someone wanted to give a present, what he desired was that seventy new institutions of Chabad-Lubavitch should be opened throughout that year. Relative to the amount of Chabad Lubavitch institutions that

existed until then, that was a mammoth undertaking, especially if it was to be done within the year!

As soon as the Sicha had ended I wrote a *tzettel* to the Rebbe, stating that I take upon myself to open 10% of the seventy new organizations. We ended up opening twelve of them! Almost all of them were new Shluchim, or independent organizations.

That night, I met a *yungerman* named Chaim Itche Drizin who was already serving as a Cheder teacher in Northern California. I offered him to become a Shliach that night! Sure enough he agreed, and the next day I entered Yechidus together with him, in which I told the Rebbe that this would be the first of the seventy new organizations in regards to the Rebbe's request!

That year, I left no stone unturned in order to create new *mosdos*. When Yud Alef Nissan arrived the following year, we compiled an album of all the new mosdos. We made a special version of that album for the Rebbe, with a gold-plated cover. We presented it to the Rebbe alongside a brand new silver *kesser* for the "Rebbe's Sefer Torah."¹⁰

The glow on the Rebbe's face when I presented the newest Shliach to California, sent me a clear message that the Rebbe had derived great *nachas ruach* from this.

cd: The finances needed, in order to open 12 new *mosdos* in one year, must have been enormous! Were you able to handle that easily?

rc: The funds needed for this initiative were gigantic, but that could not stand in the way of fulfilling the Rebbe's *hora'os*. I borrowed a lot of money, and worked frantically to pay them off.

At the end of the year, I was still \$200,000 in debt, and I felt terrible about it. Nevertheless, I didn't want to burden the Rebbe with my problems, and I only wrote in the good news.

The next time I was in Yechidus, the Rebbe read through my *tzettel*, but like a *tatte* who gauges his child's problems even when they don't openly express it, the Rebbe asked me:

וואס איז, שלמה? דארפסט האבען געלט? וויפל דארפסט דו?"

"What is the matter, Shlomo? You are in need of money? How much do you need?"

My lips froze, and I didn't utter a word. But the Rebbe repeated the question: How much to you need? Eventually the Rebbe asked: "\$200,000?" I still stood quietly.

"When are you leaving?" asked the Rebbe. "Whenever the Rebbe suggests," I responded. "When were you planning on leaving?" continued the Rebbe. "Tomorrow morning," was my reply.

The Rebbe opened his drawer, and began counting a large amount of \$100 bills. I thought I would collapse with an overload of emotions.

With a broad smile, the Rebbe said:

"דא איז נאר א טויזענט, וועסט דו גייען פארקויפען יעדער שטר פאר צוואנציק טויזענט דולר."

"Here you have only \$1000, now you should go and sell each bill for \$20,000."

Selling a dollar of the Rebbe was something I would never consider! Yet, here the Rebbe was pulling me out of my doom, without me even lifting a finger.

With renewed vigor, I landed in California and headed straight to the

office of a potential supporter. He, and the nineteen individuals I visited afterward, each paid the full price for these bills. A number of them experienced great *nissim* after having done so, but we will leave those stories for another time.

As soon as Rabbi Krinsky returned to the line, I exclaimed: "I will repair the list right away and resend it!"

What I could never have fathomed, was the Rebbe's repeating of this "business deal" a year or two later, when I was now \$250,000 in debt.

Once again, the Rebbe asked me, without me mentioning a word about my financial woes. In this instance the Rebbe instructed me to receive these dollars from Rabbi Hodakov, and to sell them for \$25,000 each!

The Rebbe cares for each of his *kinderlach* like a *tatte*, and truthfully, even in a more powerful way than that.

There was another occasion when the Rebbe showered me with unconditional *libshaft*.

When a fire consumed the original Chabad House, in 5740, my financial straits were dire. Aside from the usual expenses involved with running a region full of Shluchim, I was suddenly saddled with millions of dollars more that I needed to come up with!

One day, I received a call from Rabbi Krinsky, who explained that the Rebbe wanted to pay the payroll of Chabad of California for the month of Tishrei. Dumbfounded, I answered that I would put together a list, and send it in right away.

I compiled the list, and left out anyone who held positions in institutions that were partially government funded, for example the Drug Rehabilitation Center, and others.

Just a few hours later, Rabbi Krinsky called me again, and told me that the Rebbe had said that it is not a full list. I explained that I had left out those who got paid by the government. The line was silent, which meant that the Rebbe had been listening into the conversation, and had buzzed Rabbi Krinsky, to come to the Rebbe's office.

As soon as Rabbi Krinsky returned to the line, I exclaimed: "I will repair the list right away and resend it!"

Rabbi Krinsky was satisfied with my response and I promptly did so.

Hosha'ana Rabbah came a few weeks later, and I flew into New York in order to be with the Rebbe until the end of Simchas Torah.

As soon as I arrived, I got onto the line for *lekach*, which the Rebbe would distribute on *Hosha'ana Rabbah*. Almost every year, the Rebbe was enveloped by a certain seriousness on *Hosha'ana Rabbah*, but to me the Rebbe would smile.

This time the Rebbe didn't smile to me. Instead the Rebbe asked:

"דו ביסט באקאנט מיט אלע עובדים אין קליפורניה? דו ביסט באקאנט מיט איימעצען וואס הייסט שלמה קונין? פארוואס איז ער נישט געווען אף דער רשימה?"



RABBI CUNIN CONVERSES WITH AN HONOREE AT ONE OF HIS FIRST DINNERS.

“Are you familiar with all your workers in California? Do you know someone by the name of Shlomo Cunin? Why were you not on the list?”

Despite my shock, I managed to tell the Rebbe that because I receive a monthly check of \$300 from the Rebbe each month since the beginning of my Shlichus, I didn't add myself to the list.

The Rebbe replied:

”אפילו די גרעסטע גבירים וואס
ארבעטען פאר די מוסדות נעמען
אויכעט עפעס, אכצין דולר לחודש
אדער לשנה וכו'“

“Even the greatest gvirim which work for organizations take something, \$18 a month, or a year etc. [meaning that Rabbi Cunin is to be on his payroll, regardless of any other funds he receives].”

Aside from receiving a paycheck from the Rebbe for that month, I made sure to add myself to the payroll from that moment forward, as per the Rebbe's hora'.

I will tell you one last story which took place with me during a difficult financial period:

In the year 5728, I received a special instruction to be in New York on Yud Tes Tammuz, as did Rabbi Moshe Feller and Rabbi Yitzchok Dovid Groner.¹¹ After a surprise Farbrengen, which is a story in its own right, the three of us merited to have a special private Yechidus with the Rebbe.

I will never, ever forget this Yechidus:

As soon as I walked in, the Rebbe began to speak in a louder voice than usual:

”שלמה, איך האב געהערט אז ביי דיר דער מצב
אין שטוב איז א מצב פון עניות ודחקות און
נאך ערגער. רחמנא ליצלן, איך וויל דאס ניט
ארויסריידען. שלמה, איך וויל ניט ליידען אז דו
זאלסט זיין איינג.“

וועסט אריינגייען צו הרב חדקוב, איך האב מיט
עם שוין גערעדט, דו זאלסט אויסרעכענען וויפל
עס קאסט צום לעבן. וויפל קאסט צוויי פאר
שיך, צוויי פאר הויזען, צוויי קפאטעס, און צוויי

היטלאך א יאר. דאס וועט ער דיר געבען און ווען
ס'וועט ווערען מער וועט ער דיר געבען מער.“

“Shlomo, I have heard that that situation in your house is destitute, difficult and worse. Rachmona Litzlan, I don't want to verbalize [the nature of the situation]. Shlomo, I don't want to be in pain because things are tight for you.



THIS VERY FIRST PUBLIC MENORAH, IN LOS ANGELES, CA.

Go into Rabbi Hodakov, I have already notified him [that you will come], and make a calculation how much it costs to live. How much is two pairs of shoes, two pairs of pants, two kapotes, and two hats a year. He will give you that [amount], and when the amount increases, he will give you more.”

Not a month went by until Chof Zayin Adar 5752, that I did not receive that extra stipend from the Rebbe. Like a shepherd to his sheep, the Rebbe showers us with his care and brochos.

cd: Earlier you related some hora'os that the Rebbe gave when you appointed

the first Shliach. Were there any more hora'os you received on this matter on other occasions?

rc: The Rebbe gave me many guidelines regarding hiring new Shluchim. Because of time constraints I can't share all of them here, however I will recount one incredible episode that is related to this matter:

On an Erev Shabbos Mevorchim at the end of 5749, I was standing in 770 when I was startled to hear that Rabbi Hodakov, who was very elderly at the time, was looking for me. I ran to meet him, upon which he told me that the Rebbe had given out a ma'ane which was addressed to me.

I immediately put on my gartel, as Rabbi Hodakov explained the background behind the ma'ane.

Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky had been working tirelessly to open Chabad Houses in a number of new locations around the globe. Numerous times he had proposed the launching of a Chabad House in Los Vegas, NV; each time the Rebbe vetoed the idea for one reason or another.

Certain details had unfolded, which gave Rabbi Kotlarsky the hope that perhaps the time was now ripe for a Chabad House in Las Vegas. Once again he submitted the idea to the Rebbe. The Rebbe instructed that I be given a copy of the ma'ane on this suggestion as well. The wording of the ma'ane was as follows:

”כמו דשאר הענינים דקלפרניה - למסור עדכ”
להרר”ש ש' קונין, ובטח יחקור להמצב שם וכו'
ויחליט האם בכלל לעשות שם א"ל[או לא]. ואם
לעשות מה ואיך וכו' ובכל אופן באחריותו כשאר
הענינים שם.“

“Like all other matters of California - Rabbi Shlomo Cunin should be informed about all this, and surely he will research the situation there etc. and decide whether to do this or not, and if yes, what and in which way etc. Regardless, this is under his

responsibility like all other matters there.”

My next step upon receiving the *ma'ane* was to search out a suitable candidate for this Shlichus. I soon met Rabbi Shea Harlig, who eventually became the first Shliach to Los Vegas and leads a large group of Shluchim in that area.

I set firm guidelines in place to ensure that the *ruach tahara* that Chassidim possess should be preserved even in such an unholy place as Los Vegas.

Today, I am proud to observe that the most Chassidische group of Shluchim in my area, are the Shluchim in Nevada!

cd: Rabbi Cunin, the wealth of *zichroinois* and *hisoirerus* you shared today, carries great power. Is there something you would like to share in closing?

re: The point I would like to conclude with is one which I received numerous *hora'os* from the Rebbe about.

The first story connected with this idea, happened shortly before the first dinner for Chabad of the West Coast.

We had managed to obtain a very prestigious honoree by the name of Al Lazeroff. A large crowd of his friends and admirers were expected at the dinner.

Rabbi Hodakov called me four days before the dinner, and hinted to me that the Rebbe was on the line as well. Rabbi Hodakov told me:

“איך האב געהאט דעם זכות זיין ביים רבי'ן היינט, און זיכער וועט מען זיצען באזונדער מענער און פרויען.”

“I had the zchus to be with the Rebbe today, and surely you [will see to it that] men and women should be seated separately [at the dinner].”

I understood that this was coming directly from the Rebbe.

When it came to the dinner, I was firm in fulfilling the Rebbe's *hora'ò*. I was met with fierce opposition from all sides, and in particular from the *gvir's* family and none one less than the *gvir* himself! With the Rebbe's *brochos*, Al had a sudden

CELEBRATION 70

At the culmination of Shnas Hashivi'im since the Rebbe's birth, Chabad of California published an album depicting the new initiatives that were done in California in honor of Shnas Hashivi'im.

There was a total of 71 organizations and the like at the years conclusion.



change of heart during the dinner and asked to speak:

“This Rabbi is something special, I will never question this Rabbi again!”

A few years after I had arrived on Shlichus I received an unexpected call from Rabbi Hodakov:

“Firstly, the Rebbe asked me to tell you, that you did nothing wrong,” he preempted. “However the Rebbe wants you to know that since the matters of Chabad in Los Angeles are being publicized, you must be extra scrupulous that everything is done according to halacha, as guided by the Lubavitcher Rabbonim.”

The message was clear. Everything a Shliach and a Chossid does, needs to be in exact fulfillment of Halocha! But that is not all. After asking a Rov, one must make sure to ask the Rebbe as well.

This following story illustrates this point very well:

In my earlier years on Shlichus, feminism was very strong in California. One day a woman that had become involved in our Chabad House approached me and asked if it would be ok to coordinate an “all-woman minyan.”

I explained to her, that according to halacha that wouldn't be possible. After hearing me out, she offered a different idea: to hold a woman's mediation service.

A group of women would get together and meditate. They would also read Tehillim and other *tefillos*. But not in the style of a minyan at all.

I told her I would look into it. I called up Rabbi Dworkin, and we went through each detail of the proposition. Once he had thought it through, he determined that this would be completely *mutar*.

Like everything else I did in my Shlichus, I made sure to write to the Rebbe about it soon after. That night, my phone rang. Rabbi Hodakov was on the line.

He went over the idea of the lady that I had written about and made sure he had

understood all the details. Then it was quiet. He was talking to the Rebbe, who had been listening to the entire call! A few moments later he returned to the phone, and told me:

“The Rebbe wants me to tell you that you have to explain to them [the women] that *minhag avoseinu b'yodeinu*, and that every Chabad House is like a mini Beis Hamikdash. Therefore our services are held like they were done in the Beis Hamikdash. The ladies *daven* from the *Ezras Noshim*, and not anywhere else.

Then suddenly I heard the Rebbe's voice on the line! The Rebbe spoke to Rabbi Hodakov as if I wasn't there:

“עם זאל מען זאגען אז אזוי האט זיך אנגעפאנגען די קאנסערוועטיווע מובמענט.”

“You should tell him that this is the way the Conservative movement started.”

It wasn't enough that I had conferred with a Rov. The Rebbe had decided against the idea, despite that it might be permissible according to halacha.

Today, it is vital for every bochur to bear in mind, that on any matter, he should make sure to ask a Rov how to behave, and find out if the Rebbe ever gave *hora'os* to people in similar situations. Finally, every Chossid should ask the Rebbe for a *haskoma* and *brocha*, through writing to the Ohel, *un der Rebbe vet gefinen a veg vi tzu entferen!* **D**

1. The area that today stands between 770 and the Library of Agudas Chasidei Chabad.
2. Maamorim which were transcribed the way the Rebbe had said them, but not checked over by the Rebbe. Maamorim that the Rebbe had checked over were called Muga.
3. In the days before computers, printers and even photocopiers, everything was typed on a manual typewriter, taking much time and effort. Onion paper was thin, almost translucent paper that would enable the ink to transfer on to 22 copies a time, so that when typing once, instead of only getting one copy, many more were made.
4. At that time the Rebbe did not want the Farbrengens to be recorded.
5. The Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim Lubavitch Hamerkozis at the time.
6. Rabbi Cunin was preceded by Rabbis Moshe Feller Avrohom Korf, Avrohom Shemtov and Shalom Dovber Shemtov.
7. “Released Time” was launched during the early years of Lubavitch in America, and used out the free hour that public school children have every Wednesday in order to teach them about Yiddishkeit. Bochurim learning in 770 would take off seder each Wednesday in order to run these programs. An article about this incredible campaign will *iy”h* be featured in a coming edition of A Chassidisher Derher magazine.
8. Rabbi Cunin fondly recalls how Rabbi Hodakov told him that he [Rabbi Cunin] works through his own “channels.” Unlike most other Shluchim at the time, Rabbi Cunin corresponded directly with the Rebbe in most instances.
9. S. Diego is named after a non-Jewish “saint.” San is Spanish for Saint.
10. This was especially unique, because of the Sefer Torah's small size.
11. See Interview with Rabbi Moshe Feller in Derher Expanded Tammuz Edition 5773 for the full story.



RABBI CUNIN RECEIVES A DOLLAR FROM THE REBBE ON 23 NISSAN 5751.

PHOTO: JEM/THE LIVING ARCHIVE 7/1152