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AN
INTERVIEW

the Road To 770



Rabbi Shmuel Lew is a veteran shliach and mechanech, and a beloved mashpia to hundreds of people throughout the globe.

In an exclusive interview with *A Chassidisher Derher*, Rabbi Lew tells us about the early years of his life - how he became a Lubavitcher Chossid, how he became involved in communal work, and more. Most importantly, he gives us a glimpse of his personal connection with the Rebbe.

Rabbi Shmuel Lew resides in London, England.

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Rabbi Lew, thank you for taking the time to speak to us. Let's start from the beginning. Can you tell us a little bit about your upbringing and how your connection with Lubavitch began?

I was born in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 5700 to a religious family, my father being a lawyer from a Litvishe background. My childhood took place in an era before the big *chassidische* communities arrived in America, and you didn't see Chassidim all over New York as you would today. Whereas the Williamsburg of today is a place full of Chassidim, during my childhood it was a mostly non-religious community, *shuls* bursting with people on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur but mostly empty the rest of the year.

Lubavitch, too, had just begun to blossom in America, and Lubavitchers were few and far in between. Aside from one time when I saw two Merkos shluchim at our bungalow colony, I don't recall meeting any Lubavitchers, and only vaguely heard about Lubavitch.

My connection with Lubavitch began when I went to the Aguda summer camp in 5715, when I was fifteen years old.

Part of the *tziyur* of a camp in those days was to have *yeshiva bochurim* come as guests for a week or two during the summer to spend some time learning and relaxing. Lubavitcher *bochurim* seized this opportunity to visit the various Jewish camps and—unofficially—teach the campers Chassidus. (This was before the establishment of Camp Gan Yisroel.)

Two of the guests in Camp Agudah that year were Rabbi Berel Shemtov and Rabbi Yitzhak Meir



SHMUEL LEW AT THE AGE OF TEN.

Gourarie. Rabbi Gourarie invited me to join a *shiur* in Iggeres Hatshuva.

At first, going to the *shiur* sounded “way out there” to me. I was a busy kid. I was involved in various organizations, including Pirchei (the Agudah youth movement); I enjoyed playing sports - I wasn't looking for things to do. However, since Rabbi Gourarie had invited me, I agreed to come.

Since the *shiur* wasn't officially sanctioned by the camp, it could not take place in the *shul* or classrooms, and we had to learn clandestinely in the bunkhouses. Notwithstanding the questionable conditions, the learning was serious, and we finished the entire Iggeres Hatshuva that summer.

The Lubavitcher *bochurim* didn't only learn with me; rather, they developed a personal relationship with me and were *mekarev* me on a personal level, both in camp and later on. [For example, at the end of the summer, right before Rosh Hashana, I received a handwritten *shana tova* letter from Rabbi Berel Shemtov—in handwriting that I would later find out was a copy of the Rebbe's כתב יד קודש—together with a black, pocket-sized Tanya.]



SHMUEL LEW IN CAMP AGUDAH, SUMMER 5715.



A YOUNG SHMUEL LEW. CIRCA 5716.

At the end of the summer, the *bochurim* invited me to come to the Rebbe's Simchas Bais Hashoeva farbrengen of 5716, and this marked the first time I merited to see the Rebbe.

Following our summer together, Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Gourarie called me up one day inviting me to join the unofficial Chassidus *shiurim* in the dormitory of Torah Vodaas, where I was learning at the time. Dozens of *bochurim* in Torah Vodaas were going to these *shiurim*—Rabbi Moshe Feller, for example, who was a student in Torah Vodaas at the time (and would later become my



“THE GAN YISROEL FAMILY”. THE THREE LEW BROTHERS (L-R) CHAIM, SHMUEL, AND ELAZAR ZEEV, POSE FOR A PICTURE WHILE IN CAMP GAN YISROEL FOR THEIR FIRST SUMMER, 5716.



CAMPERS AND STAFF POSE FOR A PICTURE AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE FIRST SUMMER OF CAMP GAN YISROEL IN ELLENVILLE, NY; SUMMER 5716.

brother-in-law), was very involved—and I agreed to join as well.

I became a steady participant in the *shiurei Chassidus*. These *shiurim* were taught by various *bochurim*, including Rabbi Berel Shemtov, Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky, Rabbi Moshe Bogomilsky, Rabbi Nachman Sudak a”h, and Rabbi Gershon Mendel Garelik; and each taught at a different level and with their own style. I personally enjoyed Rabbi Garelik’s *shiur*, ultimately learning with him for two years.

Shortly before Yud-Tes Kislev, the *bochurim* held a farbrengen for the *talmidim* of Torah Vodaas. It was the first time I was at a farbrengen of Chassidim and heard this type of talk,

and it was simply fantastic. I loved it. I was so excited, I remember going home and telling my mother about it.

Over the course of the farbrengen, the *bochurim* encouraged us to come to the Yud-Tes Kislev farbrengen with the Rebbe. I went to that farbrengen, and subsequently began going to all the Rebbe’s major farbrengens.

Did you have any personal relationship with the Rebbe?

Right around that time, I had my first interaction with the Rebbe.

One of my closest friends in Torah Vodaas was a *bochur* by the name of Yosef Nachman Rottenberg, a brilliant *bochur* who later went on to become

a *dayan* in Baltimore. He, too, went to the Tanya *shiurim*, and together we would go to the Rebbe’s farbrengens.

At the conclusion of the farbrengen of Acharon Shel Pesach 5716, during *kos shel bracha*, we approached the Rebbe together with Rabbi Berel Shemtov, who said, “דא זיינען צוויי בחורים פון תורה ודעת, רוטנברג און לו, און זיי ווילען בעטען א ברכה אז זיי זאלען זיין חסידישע בחורים [Here are two *bochurim* from Torah Vodaas, Rottenberg and Lew, and they would like to request a *bracha* to be *chassidische bochurim*.]

“אין רוטנברג און...?” [Rottenberg and...?], the Rebbe asked.

“Lew,” Rabbi Shemtov answered.

“אין בין מסכים, נאר זיי דארפען אויך מסכים זיין” [I agree, but they must agree], the Rebbe said, and wished us *l’chaim*.

As the year 5716 progressed, I continued participating in the Chassidus *shiurim* and going to the Rebbe’s farbrengens, becoming more and more involved.

Interesting. So when did the real transformation happen?

In the summer of 5716, the Rebbe started Gan Yisroel under the directorship of Rabbi Moshe Lazar, who was a close family friend. Trusting that a camp under Rabbi Moshe Lazar’s direction would have a positive atmosphere, my mother decided to send my brothers and me to Gan Yisroel. (Although we had previously attended the Agudah camp, my family wasn’t specifically connected to it as we were not “Agudah’niks” per se.)

By the way, we weren’t the only non-Lubavitch family in Gan Yisroel; far from it. In fact, most of the campers were kids like us: children who learned in Chaim Berlin, Torah Vodaas and other yeshivos, and plenty of them came from homes that were not *frum*. To be sure, there were many



THE REBBE VISITS THE SITE OF CAMP GAN YISROEL IN ELLENVILLE, NY; 16 TAMMUZ, 5716.

Lubavitcher children there too, but they were far from the majority.

Now, I'd like to tell you something about Gan Yisroel that most people don't know. Although camp was only starting a few days later, the Rebbe wanted the official opening to be on Yud-Beis/Yud-Gimmel Tammuz, the Frierdiker Rebbe's *chag hageula*, so he instructed that a *minyan* go to camp and make a *chanukas habayis* on Yud-Beis/Yud-Gimmel Tammuz.

I was asked to join the trip, which was on Friday - a school day. I played hooky, and we all piled into the back of a pickup truck for the three hour drive to Ellenville, getting nicely sunburned in the process. When we arrived in camp we had a *seuda* in honor of the *chanukas habayis*, and made it back to Brooklyn right before Shabbos.

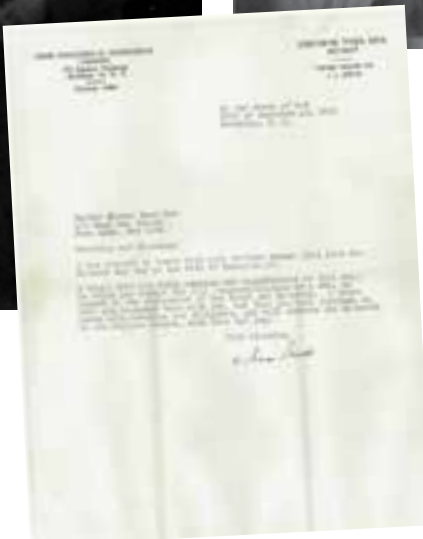
[A few days later, the Rebbe himself paid his famous surprise visit to the Gan Yisroel grounds, but I missed it; I was probably at home playing ball or the like, and I heard nothing about it. I must tell you that until today, 60 years later, it still bothers me that no-one told me about it.]

After spending that summer in Gan Yisroel, with the farbrengens, *shiurei Chassidus*, and overall *chassidische* atmosphere, I became much closer to Lubavitch. Whereas the year before I had only attended the major farbrengens, now I began coming for many Shabbos farbrengens as well. In my long treks to Crown Heights I was accompanied by other members of our little Lubavitcher '*kehilla*' in Williamsburg, which included Rabbi Moshe Feller, and the Blesofsky brothers.

[My family continued going to camp for five or six years thereafter, and we became known as a 'Gan Yisroel' family. Since both of my brothers' birthdays are in the summer, their bar mitzva celebrations were in camp (a fact that the Rebbe mentioned in a later *yechidus*), and this served to solidify our family's connection with Gan Yisroel in particular, and Lubavitch in general.]



▲ SHMUEL LEW (CENTER) POSES WITH HIS BROTHERS ELAZAR ZEEV (L) AND CHAIM (R) AT ELAZAR ZEEV'S BAR MITZVAH CELEBRATION IN CAMP GAN ISRAEL IN SWAN LAKE, NY, SUMMER 5717.



◀ THE REBBE'S LETTER TO ELAZAR ZEEV LEW, RABBI SHMUEL LEW'S YOUNGER BROTHER, IN HONOR OF HIS BAR MITZVAH WHICH TOOK PLACE IN CAMP GAN ISRAEL IN SWAN LAKE, NY, SUMMER 5717.

When was your first *yechidus*?

Towards the beginning of 5717, Rabbi Gershon Mendel Garelik asked me if I would like to go into *yechidus* by the Rebbe in honor of my next birthday. (My birthday was months away, in Adar, but *yechidus* had to be scheduled months in advance.)

I took Rabbi Garelik up on his offer, and he proceeded to arrange a date of *yechidus* for me. But he didn't suffice with making the technical arrangements, he did much more than that. He—together with the other *bochorim*—taught me how to prepare for *yechidus* like a Chossid. In the months leading up to my *yechidus*, I took upon myself all types of Lubavitcher *minhagim*: wearing woolen *tzitzis*; giving *tzedakah* before davening; preparing *negel vasser* near my bed. I got involved in *Atoh* [*Igud Talmidei Hayeshivos*].

*Looking at me he said in yiddish,
 “What do you think, I said *Havaya*,
 so I became a Lubavitcher?”*

Additionally, I decided to learn the *maamar* Basi Legani 5712 by heart.

I began coming to 770 once a week to learn the *maamar* with one of the *bochurim*, which turned out to be a major push for my budding growth as a Lubavitcher. Heretofore, my only visits to 770 had been for the Rebbe’s *farbrengens*, but now I had the opportunity to spend time *tzvishen di chevre* and become part of the *bochurim*.

[When the *bochurim* prepared me for *yechidus*, they gave me a few pointers, and one of them was not to sit down, even if the Rebbe told me to. It was difficult to come to terms with this idea—if the Rebbe instructs you to do something, how could you not listen? In a way, this was the hardest part of the *yechidus* for me to accept. But they assured me that, in any case, this was unlikely to happen and there was nothing to worry about.

When I walked into *gan eden ha’elyon*, the first word the Rebbe told me was ‘*zitzt*’ [sit down]. (As per my friends’ instructions, I remained standing.)

Two days before my seventeenth birthday, my time for *yechidus* arrived.

In my *tzetel*, I wrote about my *hachanos* to *yechidus*, gave a general description of my situation in life, and asked the Rebbe’s advice on two dilemmas facing me at the time, both regarding yeshiva.

At the time, I was still planning on becoming a lawyer like my father. I was thinking about starting night college following my graduation from high school at the end of the year, as many *bochurim* at that time would

do. However, the *hanhala* of Torah Vodaas had advised some *bochurim* to push it off a year and instead stay in yeshiva full-time, and I asked the Rebbe’s advice on what to do.

My second question was whether I should join Tomchei Temimim. Although I myself didn’t feel ready for such a step, I asked the Rebbe if it would be a good idea.



In contrast to all my later *yechidus*’n and conversations with the Rebbe, during this first *yechidus* the Rebbe addressed me with the formal ‘*ir*’ instead of the informal ‘*du*.’ [I went into *yechidus* 25 or 26 times after that, and I had many more interactions at *farbrengens* and otherwise, but this was the only time the Rebbe addressed me as



A LETTER SHMUEL LEW RECEIVED FROM THE REBBE WHILE A COUNSELOR IN CAMP GAN YISROEL IN SWAN LAKE, NY, DATED 15 MENACHEM-AV 5717, WHERE HE IS ENCOURAGED TO INSTILL IN THE CHILDREN YIRAS SHOMAYIM AND A LOVE FOR TORAH AND MITZVOS.

‘*ir*.’] I was very emotional, shaking with awe and immense feeling.

First the Rebbe told me a general *horaa*: that I should learn Chassidus for at least ten or fifteen minutes every day, adding that for my birthday, I should learn an extra *shiur* of *nigleh* and Chassidus “at your disposition.”

Then the Rebbe addressed my question about schooling:

“Regarding what you write about college: This [academic] year, which concludes in June...you will surely remain in Torah Vodaas [—instead of going to Tomchei Temimim right away]. In regards to afterwards, if you’re asking my opinion, I think you should utilize [ארייניגען] all your energies in *limudei kodesh* for another year - as you wrote - and perhaps even longer.”

I followed the Rebbe’s instructions and finished the school year in Torah Vodaas, but although I hadn’t

As I was drawing away, after I had taken two or three steps, the Rebbe called out to me and said, “זו דארפ'סט עפעס”, “You must also do something for this.”

moved to Tomchei Tmimim, there were many things happening in my life that were causing me to identify more and more with the Lubavitcher way of life. I was coming to many of the Rebbe's farbrengens, learning Chassidus, and spending time with Lubavitcher *bochurim*.

Slowly, I was becoming known as 'the Lubavitcher' in Torah Vodaas. One of my teachers was Reb Avrohom Yeshaya Rappaport, a *talmid muvhak* of Reb Shimon Shkop (the closeness is evident in the fact that he is one of the few people mentioned in the *hakdama* to Shaarei Yosher). We were learning Maseches Yevamos one day, and as he read the passage מקיש הוי' ליציאה (a *hekesh* comparing the way one acquires a woman with the way she is divorced), he looked at me and said in Yiddish, “What do you think, I said “*Havaya*”, so I became a Lubavitcher?”

What was it that made you decide to make such a big change in your life and become a Lubavitcher?

You know, my friends were always asking me the same question: “What were you missing before?” Or, “What were you running away from?”

My answer has always been that nothing was missing in my life before I came to Lubavitch. To the contrary, I had a very full life: I was a *gabbai* in the shul, played softball in the local camp, was active in various organizations, and had no wish to leave my old life behind.

And the truth of the matter is that I didn't leave my old life behind, for my values and way of life stayed the same. What learning Chassidus and being by the Rebbe accomplished was to take everything I had been doing before and make it much more meaningful.

The next summer, in 5717, I again went to Gan Yisroel. After camp was over and everyone went home, I went back to help finish packing. While there, Rabbi Avraham Shemtov and I went on a walk. He told me that, in his opinion, the time had arrived for me to join Tomchei Temimim. “You will end up coming to Tomchei Temimim anyways,” he told me, “but it will bother you that you didn't join sooner.”

I had already been on the path to Tomchei Temimim, but this was the *makeh bipatish*. I decided to go ahead with it. As far as choosing a specific yeshiva to go to, Newark, the predecessor of Morristown, seemed to be the obvious choice, since Rabbi Yosef Rosenfeld—who was a *bochur* my age—had earlier spoken to me about being my *chavrusa* there.

After the summer, on Chof-Gimmel Elul, I wrote a *tzetel* to the Rebbe detailing my decision to join Tomchei Temimim and asking if I should go to Newark, and, in addition, I wrote about a problem that had arisen. My father wasn't happy with my decision to go to yeshiva full time, instead of starting college in preparation for a career in law. I asked the Rebbe what to do.

Two days later, on Chof-Hei Elul 5717, I got my answer. Regarding the choice of yeshiva, the Rebbe wrote נוארק או מאנטרעאל, כעצת הר"מ ש' מענטליק, Newark or Montreal, according to the advice of Rabbi Mentlik *sheyichye*.

Regarding my father, the Rebbe wrote, הדיבור עם אביו שיח'י, מיוסד על תוכן נוסח ברכת הזון



A SIMCHAS BEIS HASHOEVAH FARBRENGEN IN THE SUKKAH, 5715.



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conversation with your father should be based on *birkas hazan* (the first *bracha* in *birkas hamazon*).]

What was the Rebbe referring to? Rabbi Hodakov, who, in addition to his function of relaying the Rebbe's answers themselves, was empowered by the Rebbe to explain these short, succinct responses—explained it to me: We say in *birkas hamazon* that Hashem feeds every single one of his creations. "If Hashem gives *parnassa* to the 3 billion people of the world, He can provide *parnassa* for you as well, even without a college degree." Hashem is the one who sustains us, so there's nothing to worry about.

What was Rabbi Mentlik's advice on a choice of yeshiva?

That's a story for itself. When the Rebbe had told me to go to

Rabbi Mentlik, I assumed that it was to be tested in learning, the outcome of which would determine which place was more appropriate for my capabilities.

I approached Rabbi Mentlik, and related to him my question to the Rebbe and the answer I had received. He asked me (in Yiddish), "In your *tzetel*, did you mention Montreal?" I.e., was it part of your proposal, or was it wholly the Rebbe's idea?

I said "No". (In fact, I had never heard of the yeshiva in Montreal until the Rebbe had mentioned it.)

"If so," Rabbi Mentlik said, "Montreal."

That was it. The entire episode, the entire "test" I had been nervously anticipating, must have taken less than thirty seconds. Once Rabbi Mentlik realized that the Rebbe wanted me to go to Montreal, there were no

other considerations. (Maybe the Rebbe put me through this process so that I would see what the *bitul* of a *chassidische Yid* looks like.)

All this transpired at the end of Elul 5717, a few days before Rosh Hashana 5718. That Tishrei was the first one I spent in Crown Heights, and it was then that I truly experienced Tishrei with the Rebbe: davening in 770, hearing the Rebbe's *tekios* on Rosh Hashana, and participating in the *Sukkos farbrengens*.

At the *Simchas Torah farbrengen* at night, I approached the Rebbe's place—a common practice then—and asked for a *bracha* for *hatzlacha* in *Tomchei Temimim*. The Rebbe answered "Amen, Amen." (That was the only time in my life that the Rebbe wished me a double *amen*.) As I was drawing away, after I had taken two or three steps, the Rebbe called



RABBI SHMUEL LEW (R) AT THE TRAIN STATION ON HIS WAY TO JOIN YESHIVAS TOMCHEI TEMIMIM LUBAVITCH MONTREAL. RABBI AVRAHAM SHEMTOV (L) JOINS HIM AT THE STATION.

out to me and said, “דו דארפסט עפעס”, “You must also do something for this.” In other words, the Rebbe had given me the *nesinas koach*, but I would have to work on it.

After Simchas Torah, I went to Montreal, and an entirely new chapter opened in my life. Those were *geshmake* years..

When did you visit New York during those years?



THE “PASSPORT” FROM YESHIVAS TOMCHEI TEMIMIM MONTREAL, CONFIRMING THAT PERMISSION WAS GRANTED FOR A BOCHUR TO TRAVEL TO THE REBBE.



RABBI SHMUEL LEW (C) AND FELLOW BOCHURIM BREAK OUT IN A DANCE UPON THEIR ARRIVAL AT THE YESHIVA IN MONTREAL.

The Montreal yeshiva would travel to the Rebbe four times a year: Tishrei, Yud Shevat, Pesach, and Yud-Beis Tammuz. But in order to get permission to go, you had to be tested in *nigleh* and Chassidus—both before the trip, in Montreal, and also during the trip, in New York. (I was tested in New York by Rabbi Mentlik in *nigleh*, and by Rabbi Yoel Kahn in Chassidus.) It was a strict system; Rabbi Hodakov once saw a bochur in 770 and asked him “Where is your ‘passport?’”—meaning the tests. Without your ‘passport,’ you weren’t allowed to be in New York.

We weren’t allowed to “just go”; we prepared ourselves before visiting the Rebbe. This was true even when we weren’t planning on having *yechidus* - which was most times we came to New York, since *yechidus* was only once a year. The very fact that we went to the Rebbe demanded preparation.

This is an important point in general. It is of critical importance to prepare oneself before going to the Rebbe, and you can’t compare being by the Rebbe with *hachana* to without.

Every person must prepare on their own level. Some people are on a higher level where they are expected to do more than others; for example, when I was in Montreal, my friend Rabbi Yitzchok Meir Gourarie was expected

You should always keep in mind that you are there for a single purpose – to see the Rebbe. All other “horses,” like visiting family and the like, shouldn’t distract you from your real purpose.



A LETTER FROM THE REBBE TO SHMUEL LEW UPON HIS ARRIVAL IN MONTREAL DATED 20 MENACHEM-AV 5720, WISHING HIM SUCCESS IN HIS STUDIES.



to be tested on **three maamarim baal peh**. And he didn’t just have to recite the *maamar*; rather, he was asked, “What does it say in *ois gimmel* of this

maamar? What does it say in *ois ches*?” He was expected to know it perfectly.

On the other hand, other people’s preparation was in basic Yiddishkeit. A big-*macher* in the UJA once flew to New York for *yechidus* with the Rebbe to discuss communal affairs. Although he generally didn’t keep *kashrus*, he refrained from eating the *treife* airline meal on the way to New York. His reasoning was that it didn’t feel appropriate to eat non-kosher right before going in to the Rebbe.

Raphael Nouril is a famous artist living here in England. Originally hailing from Iran, he is a genius artist who was commissioned to draw portraits of the Shah of Iran’s family. He became a Lubavitcher later in life after experiencing a miracle of the Rebbe, but many years ago, when he was still non-observant and had yet to become a Lubavitcher, he drew a portrait of the Rebbe.

Although he was completely non-religious, during the time when he was drawing the Rebbe’s portrait he put on tefillin every day. He felt that when doing something so intimately connected to the Rebbe, his behavior should be better. [This was one of the portraits on which the Rebbe commented “it’s better than the original.”]

Even people who were completely non-religious understood that going to the Rebbe demands some type of improvement in one’s behavior.

In addition to the preparation one must do before traveling to the Rebbe, it’s very important to stay focused during the trip itself.

At farbrengens, Rabbi Greenglass used to tell us the story of a Chossid who would always travel to the Rebbe on foot, eschewing travel by horse and buggy. As he got older and walking became more difficult, he went to the Rebbe less frequently. Chassidim asked him, “Now that you’re older, and you cannot make

the trip by foot, why not travel with a horse and buggy? That way, at least you’ll be able to see the Rebbe!”

“After I pass away and come to *shomayim*,” the Chossid answered, “everything that was involved in my life will try to take credit for my trip to the Rebbe. If I travel with a horse and buggy, the horse will take credit as well. Why,” the Chossid concluded, “should I have a horse in my Lubavitch?”

Rabbi Greenglass would explain that you have to prevent your own “horses” from invading your trip to the Rebbe. You should always keep in mind that you are there for a single purpose - to see the Rebbe. All other “horses,” like visiting family and the like, shouldn’t distract you from your real purpose.

Wow. Thank you for those inspiring and very relevant words. Can you share with us some of the Rebbe’s words to you in *yechidus* from after you joined Tomchei Tmimim?

Sure. My first trip from Montreal to the Rebbe was for Yud Shevat 5718, and since this was the closest time to my birthday that I would be in New York, I was scheduled for *yechidus* on Sunday, 12 Shevat.

I was the second to last person to enter *yechidus* that night, beginning my *yechidus* at about 4:00 a.m.

As I mentioned earlier, my father wasn’t happy about my choice to learn in yeshiva full-time instead of attending college in the evenings, and he was even more upset that I had gone to a yeshiva out of town. Because of this, during this visit for Yud Shevat, I had spent Shabbos with my parents instead of in 770. The atmosphere at home was a bit tense.

In my *tzetel* that I handed to the Rebbe at the *yechidus*, I wrote about the difficulties I was having at home, and the Rebbe addressed this at length.

“My father is fond of Lubavitch,” I said, “however...”

The Rebbe finished my thought: “But not that you should be [a Lubavitcher]?”

The Rebbe inquired about my father and my family, and I mentioned that my grandfather, R’ Pinchas z”l had learned by Rabbi Chaim Brisker. The Rebbe commented, “He [Rabbi Chaim Brisker] had a good relationship with the Chassidim, and the Soloveitchik here [Rabbi Yosef Ber Soloveitchik, a grandson of his] is constantly praising the Chassidim.”

Then the Rebbe advised me on how to deal with the situation at home. “Go back to Montreal as soon



THE REBBE STANDS IN THE COURTYARD OF 770, GREETING THE CHILDREN RETURNING HOME FROM CAMP GAN YISROEL, 5717. RABBI SHMUEL LEW CAN BE SEEN RIGHT BEHIND THE REBBE’S LEFT SHOULDER.

“People don’t know what Chassidim are; they think they just sing and dance, much as they are portrayed on television.”



THE REBBE POURS A L’CHAIM FOR RABBI SHMUEL LEW AT THE YUD SHEVAT FARBRENGEN, 5724.

as possible,” the Rebbe said. “Don’t enter into debates, ניט קוועטשען, אין קורנער [“don’t squeeze them into a corner”], and don’t get into *machlokes’in*.” The Rebbe repeated this a few times. The Rebbe also instructed me to, “Ask the *hanhala* to send a report [to your father] about your progress in learning, etc. When he sees your success in [yeshiva], he will realize that college is not for you.”

The Rebbe then asked me, “Has your father ever been at a farbrengen?”

“No,” I answered. But I added that I had asked him if he would like to go into *yechidus*.

“The request that he speak to a person whom he doesn’t know [i.e. going into *yechidus*] is more difficult,” the Rebbe said. “On the other hand, all types of people

come to the farbrengens, some with beards and others without beards.”

The Rebbe continued: “[In general] people don’t know what Chassidim are; they think they just sing and dance, much as they are portrayed on television. If your father would come to a farbrengen and see the people there: Americans and non-Americans, with beards and without beards; and he will hear what is being said, it will surely have an impact on him.”

The Rebbe added that my father could be driven to the farbrengen in a car—which would make it easier on him, although it might be too early to invite him for the farbrengen on Purim.

The Rebbe then asked if my parents were close to anyone from Camp Gan Yisroel (like Rabbi Kehos Weiss).

When I answered that they knew and liked Rabbi Avrohom Shemtov, the Rebbe said to ask Rabbi Shemtov to invite my father to the farbrengen and arrange for him to come.

[When my father was invited to the farbrengen by Rabbi Shemtov, the first thing he asked was, “Will you send a car?” It’s amazing how the Rebbe’s words were right on target. In the end, a *bochur* from 770 picked up my parents in his car, and they spent a few hours at the famous farbrengen of Purim 5718. Five weeks later, on Motzei Acharaon Shel Pesach, when I went by the Rebbe at *kos shel bracha*, the Rebbe asked me, “Did your father repeat something from [the farbrengen on] Purim?” “A little bit,” I replied. “Has it [=the situation] gotten better?” asked the Rebbe. “A bit better.” “Nu,” the Rebbe concluded, “it should become completely better.”]

After we had discussed my difficulties at home, the Rebbe gave some *hora’os* for yeshiva. “Find opportunities to influence others; *hashpa’ah* is not only for those younger than you, but for friends and others as well.”

Afterwards, I requested a *bracha* for my sister to have children, and the Rebbe asked who her husband was. When I replied that he had learned in Nitra [a Chassidische Yeshiva], the Rebbe asked, “Is your father happy with that? They wear white stockings!” I explained that he had become a *baal teshuva* while learning in Y.U.

The Rebbe smiled, and said, “*Es vet zayn gut*” [it will be good].

It’s amazing to hear about the warmth and *kiruv* you experienced in this *yechidus*. Let’s go back to your time in Montreal. How long did you learn there for?

I was in Montreal for four years. Those were very important years

My yechidus'n on 13 Shevat 5720 and 13 Shevat 5721 were edited by the Rebbe upon my request. I'd like to tell over some of the Rebbe's guidance on issues that challenge many of us.

Thoughts

One question I asked the Rebbe was how to deal with empty or negative thoughts.

The Rebbe said to learn by heart the first part of Tanya *perek* 41, up to the word *hamelech*, where the Alter Rebbe speaks about the answer to these issues; ה' ניצב עלי...ובוחן כליות ולב אם עובדו כראוי, Hashem stands over him...and analyzes his mind and heart to see if he is serving Him as is fitting. It's better to learn it word for word, and say it over from time to time, in speech or at least in thought.

Also, learn by heart a few *perakim* of Mishnayos and Tanya, and think them over when you walk in the street, during your free time, and between the *sedarim* of *nigleh* and Chassidus. A little bit of light dispels much darkness.

But the main thing is to focus on it as little as possible. When a thought like that falls in your mind, don't fight it! Just think about something else, no matter what it is: If it's an *inyan* in Torah, that's surely good; but if that's not possible for whatever reason, think about something else—the weather or politics—whatever will divert your mind from these thoughts.

Tefilla

I also inquired about which *inanyim* in Chassidus I should be *misbonen* during davening. The Rebbe answered that it depends

where I have more *chayus*. If I have more *chayus* in the *maamar* that I learned before davening, that's what I should think about; and if I find more *chayus* in the meaning of the words, that's what I should focus on. "The main thing", the Rebbe said, "is that it should be with *lebbedikeit* [liveliness]."

The Rebbe concluded: "You will see that it's not as difficult as you imagine it to be."

Truth

I also said to the Rebbe that I feel like I'm missing a kernel of truth in everything I do. The Rebbe told me that, in general, the first focus must be on *doing*. One of the tricks of the *yetzer hara* is to convince you that since you're not doing something *lishma*, you might as well not do it at all. The truth is, though, that you must do your *avoda* anyway. As the gemara says and the Alter Rebbe *paskens* in *halacha*, a person must serve Hashem even *shelo lishma*. As you get used to it, it will eventually be *lishma*.

Hiskashrus

During the farbrengen of Yud Shevat 5721, the Rebbe spoke at length about the idea that when a person has a sudden awakening for *hiskashrus* to the Rebbe, with no idea where the urge came from, he should know that it's a result of the Rebbe thinking about him. He must do everything

in his power to grab onto the *hisorerus* and express it in action.

Now, in yechidus, I asked the Rebbe how, specifically, to bring it into action. The Rebbe said to do like it says in Hayom Yom; לערן "וואס איך לערן", learn what he [the Rebbe] learns [which creates a tremendous bond unparalleled in the entire world, as explained in Tanya]; keep the *shuirim* of Chitas; and, first and foremost, keep the *sidrei hayeshiva*, to such an extent that it will have an effect on others.

[Since the Rebbe said that the first and foremost thing for *hiskashrus* was to keep *sidrei hayeshiva*, I made sure to always be on time for *sedarim*, and I always woke up for *seeder Chassidus*, regardless of when I went to bed. When my sister got married to Rabbi Moshe Feller, the morning after the wedding I was in *zal* for Chassidus.

I received a reward for my toil. On the days the Rebbe went to the Ohel, he would come to 770 early in the morning, at about 7:00 a.m. and listen to *krias haTorah*. The morning after my sister's wedding, the Rebbe came in for an early *krias haTorah* and I merited to be present there.]

At the end of the *yeichidus*, I said, "The Rebbe said that I should learn what the Rebbe learns..." [I.e. what is it that the Rebbe learns?]

"איך לערן גולה און חסידות" "I learn *nigleh* and Chassidus," was the Rebbe's reply.

in my life, the most significant aspect being the *teshuka* to be with the Rebbe, which was a major part of the atmosphere.

Eventually, I asked the Rebbe through Rabbi Hodakov if I could come to learn in New York to be closer to my brother, who was

learning in Torah Vodaas at the time, which would enable me to be *mikarev* him. Permission was granted, and thus, my time in 770 began.

“I realize that if you break up with her, you will feel a wound,” the Rebbe continued. “But I assure you that, eventually, you will break up with her, and the longer you wait, the deeper the wound will be.”

What was it like to learn in 770?

Overall, we didn't see the Rebbe very often. We would see the Rebbe on Monday and Thursday during *krias haTorah*, weekday *minchas* and *maariv*s, and Shabbos, otherwise, we only saw glimpses here and there. But we always felt the *aimas hamelech*, knowing that the Rebbe was there in 770. Everyone felt that 770 was their true home, and that this was the place where their innermost *neshama* expressed itself.

Every night of *yechidus* I would make sure to stick around in 770 the entire time that the Rebbe was there, and I witnessed the hundreds and thousands of people streaming through 770 to meet the Rebbe, representing all segments of Jewish life. As they came out of *yechidus*, I would speak to them and try to glean an anecdote, *vort*, or piece of advice from the Rebbe.



Were you also involved in hafatza during that time?

After I arrived back in New York, I started getting involved in visiting campuses and talking to students. This was many years before Chabad had a presence on campuses, and



RABBI LEW SITS ON THE DAIS AT THE SECOND ANNUAL “PGISHA IM CHABAD” PROGRAM, ORGANIZED FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS TO SPEND A WEEKEND IN CROWN HEIGHTS; TEVES 5725.



AN EARLY DRAFT OF THE FLYER FOR THE FIRST “PGISHA IM CHABAD” IN 5724, WITH THE REBBE’S HANDWRITTEN HAGAHOS.

our group was the one of the first that started working with students. Our group was under the leadership of Rabbi Berel Baumgarten, who worked in Tzach, and included Rabbis Yossi Goldstein, Binyomin Klein, Chaim Suede, and others.

Our first Shabbaton was at Penn State University. The Conservative rabbi at the Hillel there was formerly a rabbi in Waco, Texas, and he had met Rabbi Binyomin Klein when he was on *Merkos Shlichus* in Waco. After he moved to Penn State, he invited Rabbi Klein to bring a group for a Shabbaton, which was set for Shabbos *parshas Lech Lecha* 5722.

In order to spread the word, we hung up signs all over campus announcing the Shabbaton. The signs weren't fancy at all: They were Hendel Lieberman's painting of dancing Chassidim, with the words “Join us for a Chassidic Experience” and the time and the place.

To our astonishment, over three hundred students showed up for the Friday night meal. It was packed. You have to realize what it was like at the time: This was the early 1960s, only a short time after Chassidim had begun arriving in America, and many people had never seen a Chassidic Jew in their lives, English-speaking Chassidim no less. Curious to see what these Chassidim were, they came in droves.

The Shabbaton had a major impact on the students, many of whom eventually became *frum*, or at least more *frum*. A few weeks later, about ten or fifteen of these students came to 770 for a Shabbaton. This was



THE REBBE IS MESADER KIDDUSHIN AT THE CHUPPA OF RABBI AND MRS. LEW; 15 TAMMUZ 5723.

the first Shabbaton of students in 770, and it was the seed that would later grow into the famous *pegisha*.

When the group of students came into New York they went in for a *yechidus klolis* to the Rebbe; afterwards, three students had *yechidus protis*, and two had fascinating stories.

The first was Professor Yaakov Hanoka a”h—”Jack” at the time—a PhD student at Penn. He was in *yechidus* for about two hours. He would go on to have a very deep *hiskashrus* to the Rebbe, like a son to a father, and it all began at that *yechidus*.

The Rebbe suggested that he come learn in 770, emphasizing that he might instruct other people to learn in Yeshiva University or Torah Vodaas, but he—Yaakov—belonged in 770.

This was a radical proposal, for several reasons. First, Yaakov was completely ignorant in Jewish knowledge, lacking the ability to even read the *Alef-Beis*. Do you know what that meant in those days? Not knowing Hebrew was a serious obstacle to any Jewish learning, since there were very few English *sefarim* to begin learning from. Second, he would have a hard time learning with most of the *bochurim*, since three quarters of the population at 770 didn’t even speak English! To top it off, he was much older than most of the *bochurim* in 770.

Yet, the Rebbe decided that he should learn in 770.

Every Thursday night, the Rebbe would have *yechidus* with the *hanhala* of 770. The next time the *hanhala* went in to the Rebbe, he asked them if they had received any new applications. When they answered that an application had come in from a Hanoka student, the Rebbe asked if they had accepted him.

They answered that they didn’t see how he would fit in; again, he literally did not know *Alef-Beis*.

The Rebbe didn’t force them to accept him. But he said, “If it were up to me - I would say to take him, because he will be the first of thousands.” [They accepted him, of course.]

When I heard about this story, I danced with joy. I saw it as a *nevua*: who could have foreseen in those years, in the early sixties, the hundreds and thousands of people who would become *baalei teshuva* in the ensuing decades? Who would have dreamed of such a thing?

[It would be like saying that a Chabad House would be established in Moscow and be visited by the Russian Prime Minister; nobody could have

dreamed of such things! It just shows how these signs of *yemos haMoshiach* are happening before our eyes, yet, because it is occurring slowly, we fail to recognize the immensity of it all.]

Fascinating. What happened to the other student?

The second student - we’ll call him R. - had a non-Jewish girlfriend and he was planning on marrying her *r”l*. She was thinking of converting, but even a kosher conversion wouldn’t save the situation: he was a Kohen, prohibited from marrying a convert.

When he went into *yechidus*, after explaining to him that his status as a Kohen precludes his

RABBI LEW RECEIVES KOS SHEL BROCHA; MOTZAEI SIMCHAS TORAH 5752.



JEW/THE LIVING ARCHIVE / 160907 / 23 TISHREI, 5752

marrying a convert, the Rebbe did something very unusual. Gesturing to the shelves of *sefarim* all around the room, the Rebbe said, “You see all these books? I’ve learned every single one of them, yet I cannot become a Kohen.” Only someone born with it has that special merit.

“I realize that if you break up with her, you will feel a wound,” the Rebbe continued. “But I assure you that, eventually, you will break up with her, and the longer you wait, the deeper the wound will be.”

This *yechidus* also lasted about two hours, and R. related it to me after he came out.

A few weeks went by. A group of us was in Pittsburgh for an event at the local university (which attracted a huge crowd, about two hundred people), and we met R.’s non-Jewish girlfriend. After introducing herself, she told us that R. had a collapsed lung and was in the hospital. We made up to visit him at 3:00 p.m. the following day.

The next day, we went to the hospital an hour early to try avoiding the girlfriend, but she was in the room when we arrived. Nevertheless, Yaakov Hanoka, a good friend of R.’s, tried his luck at talking him out of marrying the girl.

It was all to no avail, and R. later married her.

A couple of years later, a group of Merkos shluchim met R., and this is how I found out the end of the story. Shortly after he got married, they began arguing and quarrelling with each other. And a fascinating thing happened: every time he argued with her, his lung felt a little bit better. At one point, they had a major argument which led to their separation and subsequent divorce, and consequently his lung was completely healed. According to the doctors, it was as if nothing had ever happened.

The Rebbe’s words “You will feel a wound” were expressed in a very physical way.

It’s astonishing how much can come out of one night of *yechidus*! Let’s return to your outreach activities.

Those were amazing times. I must have gone with Rabbi Berel Baumgarten to at least twenty campuses: Columbia University in New York, Northwestern in Chicago, College Park in Maryland, and others. We also visited communities and spoke to B’nei Brith groups, and I even remember an event in Manhattan across the street from the U.N.

It was hard work. There were probably five shluchim throughout the entire U.S at the time—Rabbi Shlomo Cunin, for example, wasn’t even married yet—and people had no idea about what Chabad was, so pulling people in was difficult.

Towards the end of his year in yeshiva, Yaakov Hanoka arranged the first *pegisha*, where students came to 770 for an “Encounter” [*pegisha*] with Chabad, and I was the co-chair of the program. The Rebbe was quite involved in it, editing the flyers and informing us if there would be a *farbrenge* that week. Furthermore, when the students joined the Rebbe’s



farbrengen, the *sichos* were tailored towards them. At one of these farbrengens, for example, the Rebbe spoke about *teshuva* and *hora'os* that can be learned from the radio.

I think the Rebbe had a special *nachas* from these early students.

You were there at the very beginning of everything...

I always say this to my *talmidim* and *talmidos*: when you look at Lubavitch today, you see a colossal movement. It includes all different types of people with varying levels of intellect and style, and there are thousands of shluchim spread throughout the world.

When you think about it for a moment, you come to realize that you are part of the most powerful organization in the world - not only because of its size, but because of its message; because of its continuous motivation to reach more and more people and bring the entire world to its ultimate purpose. It's a fantastic feeling to feel that you belong to such a movement, and you can feel exceedingly proud of who you are.

The danger is, though, that you can feel too small and insignificant to make a real difference. "There are already so many shluchim out there, so many Lubavitchers out there. What

difference can I make at this point? How is my doing—or not doing—relevant in the bigger picture?"

This thinking is completely wrong. Every person has unique *kochos* and opportunities, and no one else can do what they can. The Rebbe would always tell each person to look at himself and his station in life, and utilize his unique ability to make a difference.

There is a beautiful story that illustrates this: Rabbi Krinsky, Lubavitch's liaison to the media, cultivated a connection with a famous journalist from the New York Times. At one point, Rabbi Krinsky invited him to meet the Rebbe at a Simchas Torah farbrengen. After introducing him to the Rebbe, Rabbi Krinsky drew away to allow the journalist to speak to the Rebbe privately.

The Rebbe told him just one sentence. "You can reach more people than I."

This sentence 'went into his bones' and made a major difference in his personal and professional life, because the Rebbe made him aware of where his potential was, and where he could make a unique contribution. [Ultimately, his only son became *frum* and his grandchildren attended Jewish day schools.]

This is the way the Rebbe showed us. At every opportunity, the Rebbe exhorted and encouraged people to look at their own lives and ask themselves 'What can I do that no one else can?'

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief Rabbi of England, was one of the students who I learned with in my first years in England, and we had a *shiur* in his room for many years. When he became the new chief rabbi, he had an interview with BBC TV - watched by millions of people throughout the U.K. and beyond - and they asked him, "What made you, a brilliant Cambridge graduate, become a rabbi?"



ON AN ENVELOPE FOR RABBI SHMUEL LEW, THE REBBE CROSSED OUT THE MERKOS ADDRESS, AND WROTE "C/O S. LEW".

*I have come to realize that the youth of today have a deep *niskashtus* to the Rebbe, a profound connection in their *neshama*, more than people twenty-five, forty-five, and even fifty-five years ago.*

In answer to their question, he told them about his first *yechidus* with the Rebbe. At the time, he was doing a program on Jewish leadership where he interviewed fifteen or twenty Jewish leaders, asking each one of them about twenty questions he had prepared. When he went in to the Rebbe, after he finished his list of questions, the Rebbe said, “Now let me ask you a question: what do you propose to do to enhance Jewish life in Cambridge?”

This question turned his life around. It was the first time he realized that it’s not enough to be someone who ‘belongs’ and is affiliated with Judaism—*ashreinu ma tov chelkeinu*, a lucky member of the Jewish nation. Rather, he must be a producer, a creator, a leader himself. “Good leaders create followers,” Rabbi Sacks said. “But great leaders create leaders.” The Rebbe made him realize that he must be a leader, and take an active position in Yiddishkeit.

And this is the Rebbe’s message for every one of us.

Do you feel that young people today, after Gimmel Tammuz, are able to reach the same level of chassidishkeit and hiskashrus as in your days, when the Rebbe’s physical presence was felt so closely?

I experienced a similar type of issue when I was a bochur. It bothered me that I wasn’t there when the Rebbe was becoming Rebbe to sign a *ksav hiskashrus* to the Rebbe, and this *hergesh* was one of the reasons that, in one of my abovementioned *yechidus’n*, I asked the Rebbe’s *bracha* for *hiskashrus*.

However, as the years passed, I realized that this *hergesh* was not a correct one; it was really a diversion and distraction from my own *avoda*, and it might have



RABBI LEW RECEIVES LEKACH FROM THE REBBE; 19 TISHREI 5750.

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served as an excuse to not fully utilize my current opportunities.

Throughout all the years, you could always choose to focus on what you didn’t have. In the early years, every *bochur* could go into *yechidus* once a year, but usually only for a minute or two, and it felt a bit remote—only two or three minutes a year! Afterwards, when *bochurim* could no longer enter *yechidus*, those short *yechidus’n* were what everyone missed.

True, It’s impossible to compare this with the terrible situation after Gimmel Tammuz. But the point is the same: we cannot allow the current situation to serve as an excuse to lose focus of our *avoda*. We have to look at the present reality, and think to ourselves, “This is the situation I am in now - it’s the only show in town. Given my current situation now, what can I do to utilize my potential to the fullest extent?”

It says in the *passuk*, ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלוקיך שואל מעמך [Now, Yisrael, what is Hashem demanding of you]. We have to look at ourselves and recognize the opportunities we do have, and elevate them and utilize them to the fullest extent.

Our attitude has to be, what is required from me *now*? How can I

serve Hashem *now*? We cannot make any excuses for not doing our *avoda*.

And the reality is that this generation of Chassidim truly is *mekushar* to the Rebbe.

When Gimmel Tammuz happened, I thought that there would be two types of people: those before Gimmel Tammuz and those who came afterwards. That was my thinking as a *mechanech*.

Today, though, I have come to realize that the youth of today have a deep *hiskashrus* to the Rebbe, a profound connection in their *neshama*, more than people twenty-five, forty-five, and even fifty-five years ago. Anyone I have spoken to about this has agreed with me. I see tremendous dedication to the Rebbe’s work, more than when I was a *bochur*. I see this *hiskashrus* in the *bochurim* I farbreng with, in the *talmidos* in my school - in the way they give me *pani’m* to take to the Rebbe, and in many other ways. A large proportion of them have it in a revealed way, and even those who don’t—it’s simply more reserved and hidden. But the deepest part of them is their connection with the Rebbe. This is a very special generation.

Thank you, Rabbi Lew. 1