

לזכות  
הרה"ת ר' גד דוד ומרת שירה  
וילדיהם  
נתנאל חיים, נחמה אסתר,  
חיה מזל, מנחם מענדל, נעמי חנה,  
ומשה אליהו שיחיו  
סבג

עמ"ס

*Dr. Yaakov Hanoka,  
Baal Teshuva Pioneer*

# THE FIRST OF THOU- SANDS





**D**R. YAAKOV HANOKA A”H, A PROMINENT SCIENTIST WHO PIONEERED CUTTING-EDGE SOLAR TECHNOLOGY AND HELD 57 PATENTS IN THE FIELD, WAS ONE OF THE EARLY *BAALEI TESHUVAH* OF LUBAVITCH ON CAMPUS. HE CO-FOUNDED AND CHAIRED THE ICONIC *PEGISHOS* (“ENCOUNTER WITH CHABAD”, SHABBATONS) IN NEW YORK FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS, AND WAS A MENTOR TO MANY.

DR. HANOKA MERITED TO HAVE A RARE PERSONAL CONNECTION WITH THE REBBE, WHO PERSONALLY GUIDED HIM AS HE WADED THROUGH THE CHALLENGES AND DIFFICULTIES THAT LITTER THE PATH OF SOMEONE MAKING SUCH A MAJOR LIFE CHANGE. THE REBBE GOT HIM ACCEPTED INTO YESHIVA; HELPED HIM THROUGH THE EARLY, DIFFICULT DAYS WHEN HE COULDN'T READ A WORD OF HEBREW; OFFERED MONETARY ASSISTANCE WHEN IT WAS NEEDED; AND MUCH MORE. ALTHOUGH THE STORY OF EVERY *BAAL TESHUVAH* IS UNIQUE—EVERY PERSON HAS HIS OWN MOTIVATIONS, INSPIRATIONS, AND TRIUMPHS—IT WOULD BE SAFE TO SAY THAT MANY COMMON CHALLENGES FACED BY *BAALEI TESHUVAH* TODAY ARE REFLECTED, AND ADDRESSED, IN REB YAAKOV'S STORY.

IN TRUTH, THE STORY OF A *BAAL TESHUVAH*—A PERSON WHO TRULY EVALUATED HIS LIFE AND CHOSE TO FOLLOW HIS CONSCIENCE IN PURSUIT OF A DEEPER TRUTH, OFTEN LEAVING HIS FRIENDS AND FAMILY BEHIND—IS REALLY A MORE DRAMATIC VERSION OF THE STORY OF EVERY CHOSSID. EVERYONE, AT ONE POINT OR ANOTHER, MUST CONSCIOUSLY ASSESS HIS LIFE CHOICES AND ENSURE THAT THEY LINE UP WITH HIS VALUES AS A *MEKUSHAR* AND CHOSSID OF THE REBBE; THE LESSONS CONTAINED HEREIN ARE APPLICABLE TO US ALL.

AS A PERSON WHO WAS DRAWN TO LUBAVITCH HIMSELF, AND WHO WAS LATER INVOLVED IN BRINGING OTHERS IN AS WELL, DR. HANOKA ALSO OFFERS A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE AS TO WHO WE REALLY ARE. WHAT IS IT ABOUT LUBAVITCH THAT BRINGS A THOROUGHLY SECULAR PHD STUDENT, AN AMERICAN SUCCESS STORY, AND THOUSANDS OF OTHERS LIKE HIM, TO EMBRACE A WAY OF LIFE THAT LOOKS LIKE IT BELONGS IN SOME ANCIENT TIME IN HISTORY?

In preparation for this article, we were greatly assisted by the interview with Dr. Hanoka conducted by Jewish Educational Media's My Encounter with the Rebbe project, selections of which are included below. We would like to extend our hearty thanks to Rabbi Yechiel Cagen and the My Encounter team for making it available to us. זכות הרבים תלוי בהם.

We would also like to thank Rabbis Chaim and Yitzchok Hanoka, and the Bronstein family for sharing their personal memories, along with many of the pictures and *kisvei yad* throughout the article.

## Early Questions

One of the early activities of Chabad on college campuses was on Shabbos Parshas Lech Lecha, 5722. Headed by Rabbi Berel Baumgarten of Tzach, a group of *bochurim* and *yungelait*, including Rabbis Yosef Goldstein, Binyomin Klein, Shmuel Lew, Avrohom Shemtov, and Chaim Suede, traveled to a Shabbaton at Penn State University.

The promotion of the event was quite minimal. They hung up posters on lampposts throughout the university with Hendel Lieberman's drawing of dancing Chassidim, over which the words "Join us for an Experience" appeared, along with the time and location. To their astonishment, over three hundred students showed up for the Friday night meal.

At the time, the early 60s, Chassidim were a rare sight. Unlike other groups of Jewish immigrants, they had only begun arriving on American shores a few years earlier, and many people had never seen a Chassid in their lives. One of the curious souls who came, was a twenty-six-year-old beatnik by the name of Jack Hanoka, who sported a goatee. (When Rabbi Shmuel Lew saw him Shabbos morning driving up to shul on his bike, his reaction was, 'We'll never get this one...')

Jack had grown up in a traditional but non-religious Sephardi home. The local Conservative synagogue in his town didn't even have a Rabbi, and the only Jewish education he ever received was in the few years leading up to his bar mitzvah. But he always had an interest and yearning for spirituality. In college, he began thinking about all types of religious questions, and even experimented with keeping Shabbos for a while. But he couldn't find anyone who would provide him with



A YOUNG JACK HANOKA.

real answers, and his Shabbos observance quickly petered out.

He continued on to graduate school in Penn State, where he began contemplating his place in life on a more serious level. "I was in an environment where people basically questioned everything," he later related. "The dominant ideas in graduate school at the time were basically that life on earth is not a purposeful and meaningful thing; that we are just a speck in the cosmos. I was surrounded and immersed in these kinds of ideas, and influenced by them, but I found them very disturbing at the same time."

He nearly joined the Peace Corps for the summer, a classic destination for searching souls (a teacher convinced him out of it). The following year, the *frumme* rabbi of the Hillel, Rabbi Goldberg—who had met Rabbi Binyomin Klein when he was on Merkos Shlichus in Waco, Texas—arranged for the Lubavitchers to host the Shabbaton. "I didn't know very much about Chassidism, and I was kind of curious about the whole thing," Reb Yaakov later said. "I read up on it in whatever secular books that were available, and I heard stories from the Hillel rabbi about all these miracles of the Rebbe; but I wasn't quite sure what to expect."

Rabbi Berel Baumgarten was the main speaker over the weekend. But Jack wasn't particularly affected by the speeches; it was the presence of the Chassidim, *who* they were, that truly impressed him. This was the first time he had ever met people who were utterly unapologetic about being Jewish, who were truly happy about their religion.

# "In the train station we were dancing to the tune of 'Hoshia Es Amecha.' This was a little unusual for American Jewish college students."

And then there were the *niggunim*, which were constantly sung throughout the evening. Before the Shabbaton, some of the students had managed to get their hands on a copy of the first record of Nichoach, and the *niggunim*, particularly "*Avinu Malkeinu*," had made a deep impression on them. Now, on Friday night, Jack felt drawn in by the *niggunim*, and spent the entire Friday night with the Shabbaton. The following morning, Shabbos, after teaching a physics class he came to shul, and stayed throughout the day trying to soak up the atmosphere.

Late Motzei Shabbos, after another event at Hillel, a group of students accompanied the Chassidim to a train station about an hour away, in Lewistown, where they would catch a train back to New York. "In the train station," Reb Yaakov related, "we were dancing to the tune of '*Hoshia Es Amecha*,' which had just been introduced in the Rebbe's court on Simchas Torah that year. This was a little unusual for American Jewish college students, but it was very memorable."

The entire next day, Jack was trying to study for an exam on advanced math, but he couldn't concentrate. Finally, at night, he called the Hillel rabbi and told him that he needed to talk to him. The rabbi told him to come over to his house. When Jack arrived, he found the rabbi in his bathrobe ready for bed, and he told him what happened.

Realizing that Jack had truly been affected by the weekend, Rabbi Goldberg called 770 and arranged a

*yeichidus*. Two weeks later, on a rainy Thursday, a small group of students piled into a couple of cars and drove up to New York together with Rabbi Goldberg, and they went into a group *yeichidus* with the Rebbe.

The Rebbe spoke about Shabbos, and how it shouldn't be looked at as a day of restrictions—as a negative day—but as a day of inspiration and spirituality. Being that it was the week of Shabbos Mevorchim Kislev, the Rebbe also spoke about Chanukah and its lessons, that a person should always grow in light, and that a little bit of light can go a long way.

("I don't know if the Rebbe knew at the time that my name was Chanukah, or whether there was any connection, but I sometimes wonder about it," Dr. Hanoka later said.)

## *The First Yeichidus*

Afterwards, three students went in for private *yeichidus*. One of them was about to marry a non-Jewish girl, and had been brought by the Hillel rabbi in hopes of convincing him out of it. He had a long, fascinating *yeichidus* with the Rebbe, which was followed by an incredible miracle in the following months. (See Derher 5776, interview with Rabbi Shmuel Lew, for details of the story.)

The next student, a girl, wrote a sixteen page letter with her entire life story, before going in. Then, at one o'clock in the morning, it was Jack's turn.

"I had no idea what I was in for. It just was not something that your typical college student was prepared for at all. No one really sat down with me and explained to me what a Rebbe is and so on and so forth.

"But the Rebbe worked very hard to make me feel comfortable, and he just had me talk for a while about my life and some of the issues that I had. I had all these questions, and mixed feelings, about being Jewish, about being different from non-Jews, things like that. The Rebbe wanted to hear my whole life story. I think the Rebbe understood right at the outset what the problems were, and he tried to address them. He explained to me that part of the issues stemmed from the fact that a Jew must be one with Torah, with G-d, before he can feel whole. Without that, he is not going to feel like a whole person."

During the *yechidus*, Jack told the Rebbe that Rabbi Goldberg had suggested that he join a yeshiva. The Rebbe agreed that it was a good idea, but immediately prepared him for some of the problems he would have adjusting to the new life. The Rebbe told him that “in the first three months, you shouldn’t ask yourself what you’re doing here, because you won’t be able to answer that question.” [Later the Rebbe said in the first *six* months.] The Rebbe emphasized that he might instruct other people to learn in places like Yeshiva University or Torah Vodaas, but he—Jack—belonged in 770.

The Rebbe said that Jack should finish his semester in college before coming to yeshiva, adding, “his name is ‘Chanukah’ so he’ll come to learn in the yeshiva around ‘Chanukah’ time.”

Jack was in *yechidus* for over an hour. “I walked out of there knowing that, somehow, my life had been changed forever,” he later related. When he told his rabbi that he was actually planning on going to yeshiva, the rabbi was stunned. The change that had come over him in such a short amount of time was remarkable.

“Do you know what it meant for a guy like that to come to 770?” Rabbi Shmuel Lew says. “He didn’t know Aleph Beis! I’m not talking about the Aleph Beis of Yiddishkeit—he literally didn’t know the difference between an Aleph and a Beis. And in those days, there were very few English *sefarim* to learn from. Three quarters of the *bochurim* in 770 didn’t even speak English, and to top it off, at twenty-six-years-old he was much older than anyone else in yeshiva.

“In those years, every Rosh Chodesh, the Rebbe would have *yechidus* with the *hanhala* of 770. The next time they went in, he asked whether they had received any new student applications. They said that a



RABBI PINNY LEW

YAAKOV HANOKA, SECOND FROM RIGHT, JOINS THE DANCING AS THE BOCHURIM ACCOMPANY THE FIRST GROUP OF TALMIDIM HASHLUCHIM TO BRUNOY, FRANCE, ADAR 5722.

Hanoka student had indeed applied, and the Rebbe asked if they had accepted him.

“They answered that they didn’t see how he would fit in. (Again, he literally couldn’t read a single Hebrew word).

“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.” [The new student was accepted, 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 teshuvah* in the ensuing decades? Who would have dreamed of such a thing?”

Jack never knew that there had been any complications about his acceptance into yeshiva, and would only hear

**The Rebbe emphasized that he might instruct other people to learn in places like Yeshiva University or Torah Vodaas, but he—Jack—belonged in 770.**

about this many years later. Following the Rebbe's instructions, he went back to college for the month or so that it took to complete the semester, after which he went home for a week. Several family members tried convincing him out of his crazy new idea; one uncle even offered to buy him a new suit if he forgot about the whole thing.

His parents weren't sure what to make of it. They were not adamantly opposed, per se; it was more that they were worried that their dear son had gone off the deep end. His father, who had lost his own father at a young age and had worked in a wholesale business all his life, had always dreamed of his only son becoming a professional. The prospect of his son throwing away his career was very upsetting to him.

## The First Visit

But Jack was determined to go ahead with it. On Asara B'teves, he came to 770 together with his family.

"You have to realize the contrast here," Rabbi Shmuel Lew says. "He was coming from Penn State University—almost a city, with its own police force, etc. The buildings are beautiful, imposing structures. In comparison, the yeshiva in 770 was tiny.

"But we tried doing what we could to make his mother feel better about the place: We arranged for the janitor, who usually came in once a week, to mop up in honor of their arrival; we cleaned out Rabbi Dovid Raskin's office and gave him the title 'dean'; and we assigned official sounding titles to all the other *hanhala* members.

"After they had seen the *zal*, it was time to show them the dormitory. As mentioned, this was on Asara B'teves, and this was all happening at the same time as the Rebbe's *haftara* during *mincha*. I would never ever miss a *haftara*, but *someone* needed to show

him the dorm. It was between me and Asher Zeilingold, and I ended up going."

He showed them to the dorm, where Jack had been arranged to sleep in the "penthouse" room, one of the nicest rooms available. His mother took one look at it and started crying.

"It looked like much more than a regular goodbye," Rabbi Lew says. "It was more of a farewell. I remember that she was crying. She felt like she was taking her beloved son—a successful, promising student—and sending him back into the middle ages."

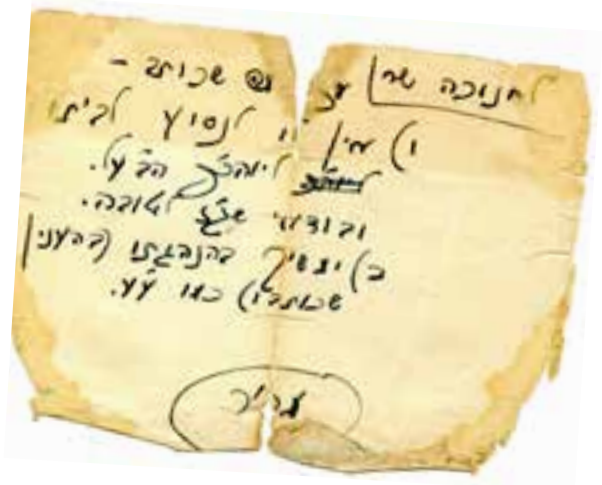
"Coming to yeshiva, I didn't know exactly what to expect," Dr. Hanoka related. "But I felt internally that this was something I *had* to try; I had to find out if this was where I could find the answers that I had been looking for for so long."

That night, Rabbi Dovid Raskin farbrenged in the dorm, and this marked the first time Yaakov participated in a *chassidisher* farbrengen with *bochurim*.

## Settling In

In the beginning, yeshiva life was very difficult on him. He started learning Gemara Pesachim, but he couldn't relate to the Talmudic discussion; why would anyone care about these issues? He also began studying Shaar Hayichud V'haemuna of Tanya, but this, too, proved difficult to digest. As mentioned, there were very few English books printed at the time, so although the *bochurim* searched high and low to find him everything they could, most of his learning ended up happening orally, talking to the *bochurim*.

"The Rebbe's words came true: I kept asking myself, 'Is this really for me? Can I see myself being like these other people here?' But I kept in mind what the Rebbe had told me—'Don't ask yourself what you're doing here because you won't be able to answer it'—so I tried to avoid thinking about it.





“I tried to get to the bottom of *what was here*; what was motivating people, what it meant to really be a Jew, and I started developing a feeling for it. Just being there in 770, and being present. I remember writing a letter to Rabbi Goldberg about how I felt so stirred simply by being in shul Shabbos morning. So many people were davening together, and they really meant it. These are experiences I had never had before.

“I sensed that there was something really mysterious and deeply significant going on here—the Rebbe, the farbrengens, the melodies—I didn’t know what it was at the time, but I had a strong sense of it. People had this deep faith and *emunah*, a commitment to study and learn, and this devotion to whatever the Rebbe said. People were willing to go out to faraway places to help spread Yiddishkeit, and this made a very profound impression on me. I had never seen Jews who were so dedicated before; I wasn’t sure how to put it all together yet, and I didn’t see exactly how I fit in this whole picture.

“There were many difficulties, but I was determined to try it out anyway, and after a while, it became clear to me that this was what I wanted to do, this was the kind of life I wanted to lead.”

After several months went by, Yaakov was invited by his friends to host a Shabbaton in Penn State. Although they were initially reluctant, the *hanhala* gave him permission to go together with Shmuel Lew. A



YAAKOV HANOKA AT HIS WEDDING.

week and a half before their planned trip, Yaakov wrote a *tzetel* to the Rebbe asking for advice and a *bracha*, but he did not receive an answer. The evening before they left, on Thursday night, Rabbi Hodakov tapped him on the shoulder and told him that the Rebbe would answer his letter—in person!

Yaakov was taken aback by the sudden *yechidus*, but he was in for a bigger surprise. When he went into the *Gan Eden Ha'elyon*, he found the Rebbe sitting without a hat or *kapote*—an extraordinarily rare phenomenon. (This happened to Yaakov more than once, a fact that underscores his uniquely personal connection with the Rebbe.) He went in at 9:00pm and spent over half an hour in the Rebbe’s room.

**“I sensed that there was something really mysterious and deeply significant going on here—the Rebbe, the farbrengens, the melodies—I didn’t know what it was at the time, but I had a strong sense of it.**



# You're a Pioneer!

his friend Asher Zeilingold. The following description of the *yechidus* is taken from that letter, as well as Dr. Hanoka's recollections years later. As is evident in the conversation, the Rebbe spoke with remarkable warmth and informality.

The Rebbe: Good evening Mr. "Chanukah."

*The Rebbe asked how he was progressing. He also inquired whether he understood Yiddish, and whether he listened to any shiurim (lessons) in the yeshiva, etc.*

Then the Rebbe continued: How do you like the yeshiva? You needn't answer if you don't want to.

Yaakov Hanoka: I don't mind answering, but I don't want to waste the Rebbe's time. I am convinced that coming to yeshiva was the right thing, and I have no regrets for the move I made.

The Rebbe: How are you doing financially? You needn't answer on this either. I don't believe in asceticism, it's not the way of Chassidus.

Yaakov Hanoka: So far I still have some money. I can tutor boys in English when I am out of money because I'm a college grad. I am not worried about money.

*The Rebbe instructed him not to tutor for pay, and told him that he—the Rebbe—would provide him with money. Yaakov demurred, and said that he would get from his parents.*

The Rebbe (with a big smile): You must feel like a pioneer. [As Yaakov later related, the Rebbe stressed every syllable: pi-o-neer.]

Yaakov Hanoka: I don't like to be an example. I don't yet feel fit to represent what they expect of me.

The Rebbe: When you go to Penn State tomorrow for Shabbos, act yourself. This Shabbos you must not act like what's expected from you for next Sunday. On the other hand, Monday should not be like Sunday, but better. Convey to the students your true feelings, and don't be afraid that it might chase them away or distance them. Don't lead them to believe that you lack anything as a result of coming to yeshiva.

And as for being an example, it's not your choice! Every Jew, by virtue of *mattan Torah* is automatically—whether frum or not, whether aware or not—an example to the world. This is one of the reasons for

After Yaakov came out of *yechidus*, Shmuel Lew debriefed him, later writing it down in a letter to

antisemitism. So don't feel bad about being an example, because you are one whether you like it or not.

*Yaakov had been having trouble with his feet.*

The Rebbe: Give tzedakah before putting on tefillin. *(The Rebbe also provided an explanation on the connection of tefillin and the feet, but Yaakov couldn't remember the details.)*

*This was the year when the Rebbe embarked on a campaign<sup>1</sup> to encourage people to fulfill two of the Purim mitzvos: mishloach manos and matanos laevyonim. In this yechidus, which took place shortly before Purim, the Rebbe instructed Yaakov to encourage his friends in this regard.*

The Rebbe: When you are at Penn State, you should convey the message of Purim and the two mitzvos to your friends there. They are easy, and might seem small, but are still important.

To understand this: Moshe Rabbeinu was the ultimate in *daas* (knowledge) and a thirteen-year-old American who knows almost nothing is very low in *daas*. Yet, they *gleichen zich ois* (are equals) in two things. One is *maaseh* (action): both have an equal obligation to wear tefillin, etc. The second is *emunah* (faith): Moshe Rabbeinu needs *emunah* as much as a child. As great a level as one can attain with *taam v'daas* (knowledge and reason), Hashem is still higher, and you need *emunah*.

Similarly, just like the greatest and lowest must equally be *mevatel* (submit, abnegate) themselves to Hashem, so too, the biggest and smallest mitzvos are equally vital in the detail of *bitul haratzon* (self abnegation). The two mitzvos of Purim, no matter how small they seem, are vital. Those mitzvos also have a deep spiritual significance. They represent the unity of all Jews from רעים (friends) ["gifts of food from friend to friend"],—"friend" represents someone close in spirituality—to אביון (poor) ["and presents to the poor"], and "poor" is the strongest nuance to describe a destitute one who lacks everything.

*Rabbi Shmuel Lew writes:* On Thursday night, Rabbi Hodakov asked me to tell him over what I heard from Yaakov about his *yechidus*. Then, on Friday afternoon, when we already were at Penn State, I received a long distance call from Rabbi Hodakov. He said that he had asked the Rebbe, and had confirmed the two points about tzedaka before tefillin (though the Rebbe did not repeat the connection between the two) and about Moshe Rabbeinu and the child.

*(Teshura Vigler-Lew 5763)*

The following day, Yaakov and Shmuel travelled to Penn State. To Yaakov's surprise, many of his friends were intrigued by his experience, and were interested in hearing about it. Others thought he was crazy. "I had a good friend who was a psychology major, and he thought I needed some professional help," he related.

Yaakov slowly settled into learning in yeshiva, and the Rebbe continued taking personal interest in him. Before Pesach, all the bochurim received free suits from a store on the Lower East Side, and Yaakov picked out a suit that didn't end up fitting him well. When the Rebbe spotted him in the hallway wearing his ill-fitting jacket, he asked him if he had lost weight. Yaakov

said that no, he hadn't. The Rebbe told him, in English: "Chassidism is not asceticism."

At one point, Rabbi Berel Baumgarten went to visit Yaakov's parents to try assuring them that their son wasn't in a "monastery." He managed to calm them down, and reported on it in a letter to the Rebbe, who responded: מובן שדרוש גישה מיוחדת ושימת לב, ובפרט שרבים תלויים בהצלחת הטיפול עמו. It [should be] clear that a special approach and careful attention is required [when dealing with him], especially since many are dependent on the success of how things work out with him.

## Exhibit A

During his time in *Yeshiva*, Yaakov would often join Rabbi Baumgarten on his trips for Tzach. Mostly, they visited Conservative and Reform communities all over



SOME OF THE MANY LETTERS YAAKOV RECEIVED FROM THE REBBE OVER THE YEARS COVERING A WIDE ARRAY OF ISSUES AND TOPICS.

the Metropolitan area, and Yaakov was brought in as “Exhibit A” for what a good Jewish college student can accomplish.

In the summer, Rabbi Baumgarten took him to the conference of the Association of Jewish Scientists (AOJS). Over the previous year, two famous, controversial letters of the Rebbe had been published: one that discussed on the age of the universe—that it is literally only a few thousand years old, and that science can’t prove otherwise; the other was about the Rebbe’s opposition to attending college. Although they were religious, the scientists of AOJS were not ready to stand up against common scientific consensus, opting instead to figure out interpretations of the Torah that fit with it. Furthermore, they were irked the Rebbe was getting involved in topics that they felt was *their* field, not his. They were very upset over these two letters, and, having gotten wind of this, Rabbi Baumgarten traveled to the Catskills to join their conference, and brought along Yaakov—a budding scientist himself—and arranged for him to speak about his life story.



YAAKOV AT HIS GRADUATION FROM PENN STATE UNIVERSITY.

Notwithstanding the differences in opinion, Yaakov was quite taken by the experience of meeting other frum scientists for the first time.

One of the founders of AOJS was Dr. Herbert Goldstein, a famous physicist from Columbia University, who incidentally had some Lubavitcher relatives. “Sometime later,” Dr. Hanoka related, “I saw Dr. Goldstein come in to a farbrengen, in the back of the room, which was near where I was standing. I immediately alerted Rabbi Leibel Groner about who he was and what an important person he was, and he was brought up right near the Rebbe and introduced to him. (His hat got totally squashed by the time he got up there.)

“People remarked that after the Rebbe met him and they chatted briefly, the farbrengen took an entirely different turn. The Rebbe started talking about the importance of *emunah*. The human mind is limited and finite, and *emunah* takes over when the mind is limited. Ultimately, it is much more important.” (Dr. Goldstein also had a lengthy correspondence with the Rebbe.)

## Pegisha

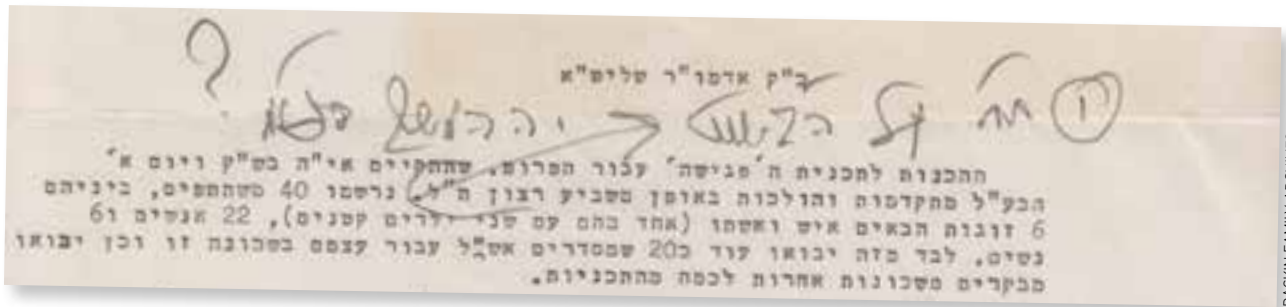
A few weeks after Yaakov came to learn in yeshiva, Rabbi Hodakov approached him and asked him whether he could arrange a program for students to learn in yeshiva during winter break. He replied that he didn’t think that students would be ready to give up an entire vacation, but they might come for a weekend. Rabbi Hodakov told him to do it however he saw fit, and to work on it together with Shmuel Lew.

And so, they began planning. The first item on the agenda was coming up with a name. Being that “encounter” was a popular word among the spiritual-seeking crowd at the time, Yaakov suggested “An Encounter with Chabad.” Translated into Hebrew, this became the famous “*Pegisha im Chabad*,” or simply “*Pegisha*.”

Unlike shlichim and *askanim* today, who have decades of inherited wisdom and collective experience to glean from, they were forced to train on the job. Most of the expenses, like food, were donated, and they received a twenty five dollar budget from Tzach to cover the advertising and flyers (which, Dr. Hanoka later noted, was considered a lot at the time). They got their hands on a list of all the Hillels in the country, and mailed flyers to every single one.

Seventeen students showed up for that first *Pegisha*. This marked the beginning of one of the most iconic programs in Lubavitch history, which produced innumerable *baalei teshuvah* over the years. Dr. Hanoka





ת"ח על הכשרו"ט. ON A DUCH OF THE PREPARATIONS FOR AN UPCOMING "PEGISHA IM CHABAD" PROGRAM, THE REBBE RESPONDED IN HIS HOLY HANDWRITING. וההמשך בפ"מ [בפועל ממשי?] - THANK YOU FOR THE GOOD NEWS. IS THERE MORE [TO REPORT] ABOUT TANGIBLE RESULTS?

continued running them throughout the various stages of his colorful life: when he was learning in 770; when he was completing his PhD at Penn State; and after he got married and embarked upon his illustrious career as a solar-energy pioneer.

The Rebbe encouraged him very strongly in this area and guided him closely. In the early years, when Yaakov was the one choosing all the themes and lecture topics, the Rebbe helped him in these decisions as well. One interesting *hora'a* he received was to use words like 'atomic' in lecture titles in order to make them sound attractive.

As far as speakers, the general guideline from Rabbi Hodakov was that they must be *shomer Shabbos*, but not necessarily Lubavitchers. In the earlier years, he would ask the Rebbe to suggest names, which he did. (One person the Rebbe sent was Dr. Nissan Mindel.)

Throughout his life, Dr. Hanoka was reluctant to be the official speaker or center of attention at these events—he preferred to view himself as the chairman—'the simple man setting up the chairs'—but the Rebbe was always pushing him to put himself more out there. In one response to a letter he had written, the Rebbe noted several names for speakers, and, at the end of the letter added "and the author of this letter too." This dynamic was evident at other times as well. At the Rebbe's behest, Dr. Hanoka would write extremely detailed reports after each *Pegisha*: how each speaker performed;

how they had been received; which parts of the event had been more organized and which less; which segments should be changed for the following year and which were successful. At the end of one of these reports, the Rebbe wrote a sharp *maane* about the fact that he had neglected to mention his own role, and that this was "עניוּת שלֹא", modesty which is out of place.

The Rebbe would also look over every brochure that they published, though there usually weren't many edits. This prompted Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky to comment to Dr. Hanoka that "the Rebbe seems to have no problems with your brochures." (Later on, when Dr. Hanoka wasn't writing all the brochures anymore, the *hagahos* became much more frequent...)

Later on, with the Rebbe's encouragement, they began arranging *Pegishos* in the springtime for professors. One year, they had a program on Shaar Hayichud V'haemuna of Tanya, which discusses the profound philosophy of Chassidus on the creation of the world. Professor Paul Rosenblum, who was a popular speaker at many of the *Pegishos*, and Rabbi Dovid Moshe Lieberman both spoke about their understanding on the subject.



# The Rebbe shook his head, and explained his reasoning: “You’ll do more for Yiddishkeit with three initials after your name.”

In the beginning of Shaar Hayichud, the Alter Rebbe explains that Hashem creates the world through the letters of the *asara maamaros*, and Professor Rosenblum cited a metaphor from a concept in quantum mechanics called “creation annihilation operators.”

After the event, on a Sunday night following *maariv*, the Rebbe stopped Dr. Hanoka and asked how it went. “Boruch Hashem,” he replied. To which the Rebbe responded, “We say ‘Boruch Hashem’ for everything,” and asked for more details. Dr. Hanoka

repeated Professor Rosenblum’s metaphor for the creation of the world from quantum mechanics. “I could tell that the Rebbe’s interest perked up enormously as soon as I started telling him about this,” Dr. Hanoka related. “I took this as an indication that—as he said at other times—the Rebbe felt that modern science could be very useful as a way of understanding abstract ideas in Chassidus. This made quite an impression on me at the time.”

## The power of three initials

After a year in yeshiva—just as he was settling in—the Rebbe told Yaakov in *yechidus* that it was time to go back to graduate school and complete his PhD. Yaakov replied that he had been thinking of staying in yeshiva and becoming a Hillel rabbi. [“I hadn’t realized that this had been the Rebbe’s plan all along,” he later said.] The Rebbe shook his head, and explained his reasoning: “You’ll do more for Yiddishkeit with three initials after your name.” In a long, handwritten *tzetel*, the Rebbe elaborated on this (see sidebar).

Humorously, the Rebbe then mentioned the fact that Britons love putting initials after their name, and, in a similar vein, went on to share some of his own experiences in university. When he had been in Berlin, he had taken a course with a Nobel-prize winning chemist

## Your Shlichus

After a year in yeshivah, the Rebbe instructed Yaakov to go back to college and complete his degree. In addition to his words in *yechidus*, the Rebbe elaborated on his reasoning in the following handwritten *tzetel*:

כא"א מאתנו - עליו להפיץ היהדות ככל אפשרותו. וכמובן לכל לראש - במקום שיכול להשפיע ביותר, ובפרט באם המקום זקוק להשפעה ביותר, וכמובן באופנים המתאימים ביותר למקום זה.

מזה מובן - שעליו השליחות בזה ביותר בחוגי הסטודנטים פראפעסארי וכו"ב. אופן פעול למילוי השליחות - היא עצם העובדה שיראו, שמאז נתקרב לתומ"צ נחום לו בהצלחה במקצוע שלו הקודם שהוא נחשב בעיניהם ביותר וביותר. מזה מובן - איך שצ"ל גודל השתדלותו בזה.

כל זה הוא נוסף על עוד טעם עיקרי: כיון שהשקיע כו"כ שנים בלימודים אלו - צריך להשלימם בכדי שיוכל לנצלם ככל האפשרי. - כן נוגע הצלחתו בהנ"ל להדתיית של משפחתו. וק"ל.

Each and every one of us is tasked with spreading Yiddishkeit to the best of our ability. Obviously [this is to be done] primarily in the place where one will have the most profound effect; especially if this place is in dire need of inspiration. Obviously [this must be done] in a manner most appropriate for this particular place.

From this we can discern that your *shlichus* [to spread Yiddishkeit] is primarily in the [academic] circles of students, professors, and the like. An effective way of carrying out this *shlichus* is by the mere fact that they will see, that since the time you were brought closer to Torah and mitzvos, you have seen increased success in the field you pursued earlier - something which is of utmost importance to them [the academic community]. Obviously, then, you must put **much** effort into this.

The above is in addition to another main reason: since you have already expended many years on these studies, you must complete them in order to be able to utilize [this knowledge] in the best way possible. In addition, your success in this field will also affect the Yiddishkeit of your family. This is obvious.



CHAIM B. HALBERSTAM via JEM, 17 ELUL 5749, 31540

by the name of Professor Noritz. However, the Rebbe said, he couldn't understand: Why would such a famous professor be teaching such a simple course as an introduction to chemistry?

It turned out, the Rebbe continued with a broad smile on his face, that the teachers were paid based on the

number of students attending their classes, and many more students took the introductory courses than the advanced ones.

They also talked about different options for university. Yaakov mentioned the idea of going to Brandeis, an elite university in Boston which had been founded by the local Jewish community. But the Rebbe was adamantly against the idea, telling him that a Jewish university could only go one of two ways, and they—Brandeis—had not gone the





A BOOK AUTHORED BY YAAKOV HANOKA OF TORAH'S VIEW ON THE AGE OF THE WORLD, ONE OF MANY WORKS ON THE TOPIC OF TORAH AND SCIENCE.

right way. But the Rebbe gave some of his own suggestions. As Yaakov later related, the Rebbe was very familiar with all the universities in the New York City area, and mentioned several options, like NYU and Columbia University. The Rebbe even offered him a loan to cover his continued schooling (although he didn't end up needing it). "Someday, you will make a lot of money," the Rebbe told him.

The Rebbe also gave him advice on some very practical issues.

"Before I came to 770, when I was in graduate school, I had a very irregular schedule," Dr. Hanoka related. "I used to work in the lab until eleven or twelve at night, then meet my friends for a beer, after which I would read for a few hours. Then I would sleep for the better part of the morning, waking up at ten or eleven o'clock. Before I went back to school, I told the Rebbe that I was concerned about this.

"The Rebbe emphasized to me that it's very important to have a regular schedule, eat the same time every day,

to do everything at the same time. And then the Rebbe said something which I'm sure he didn't say to his regular Chassidim: "I have found this to be very helpful in my own personal life."

Yaakov didn't feel ready to return to university. He wanted to spend more time learning in yeshiva, to continue learning how to be a *frumme* Yid. But the Rebbe insisted, and he acquiesced.

He ended up returning to Penn State to complete his degree, and the adjustment back to graduate school as a newly-religious student was not an easy process. "I taught undergraduate students as part of my assistantship," Dr. Hanoka later related. "The first day, when I had to teach a class with a beard and *yarmulke*, I was a little nervous. As soon as I walked in, I could tell that some of the Jewish students started smiling. But I got over it, and after a while, I didn't think about it very much." The Hillel rabbi supported him throughout, and also arranged a kosher house for him and some other religious students.

## Three full cups

While he was in graduate school, he came to New York for Simchas Torah 5724. Towards the end of the farbrengen, the Rebbe called on three people to say *l'chaim* on three cups of wine. "The Rebbe called out my name, and all of a sudden, they thrust me on top of a table and put a cup in my hand. The Rebbe motioned to me to say *l'chaim* on a full cup, so they filled it up with wine and I drank it. Then the Rebbe said again...and I ended up with three very large cups of wine.

"Afterwards, the Rebbe gave me a fantastic *bracha*, in English, in front of everybody: "May you be successful in everything you do, both materially and spiritually, and may you find a good *shidduch b'karov mammash*."

## Proactive

"The Rebbe stressed to me how it is important to take the initiative in trying to be *mekarev* someone," Dr. Hanoka related. "People are not going to come up to *you* and ask *you*, so you have to break the ice for them. You have to take the initiative and try to make them feel comfortable. I always had a problem with this, and always felt kind of shy about doing this. But the Rebbe really pushed me in that direction. He always wanted me to speak, have my presence known, and share my experiences with other people."



YAAKOV HANOKA POSES WITH HIS TEAM OUTSIDE HIS COMPANY HEADQUARTERS.

“I feel that this *bracha* is what sustained me throughout my career and also sustained me in terms of my spiritual life. I was very fortunate to get such a wonderful *bracha* from the Rebbe and I have worked hard to fulfill it as much as I can.”

When he got engaged later that year, they said a *l'chaim* right outside the Rebbe's room, in *Gan Eden Hatachton*, and the Rebbe came out to wish him *mazal tov*. “Now is no time to think about crystal growth, [the topic of his phd research],” the Rebbe told him in a joking manner.

Yaakov was married on 11 Tishrei 5725 to his wife Binah a”h, of Gerer lineage, while the Rebbe was sitting *shiva* for his mother, Rebbetzin Chana. Although he didn't know it at the time, the Rebbe requested that *bochurim* go to his *chassuna* to dance.

Yaakov had only spent a single year in yeshiva, during which he had learned everything from Aleph Beis to Chassidus to Shulchan Aruch. Naturally, his knowledge was still quite limited, and his wife suggested that they spend some time in Eretz Yisrael where he would attend *kollel*. The Rebbe rejected the idea, instructing him instead to pursue his career and become well known in his field by publishing papers and other means.

Yaakov and his wife returned to Penn State so that he could complete



YAAKOV HANOKA AT WORK

his degree, and they lived a *frumme*, Chassidishe lifestyle at the highest standards.

From when Yaakov had gone to 770, and had taken upon himself this new lifestyle, he had been keeping *cholov Yisrael*, although it was very difficult to obtain milk in central Pennsylvania. This led to an uncomfortable situation: Rabbi Goldberg, the Hillel rabbi, did not keep *cholov Yisrael*, and Yaakov couldn't eat in his home anymore.

Rabbi Goldberg felt hurt. Yaakov conveyed this to the Rebbe, who instructed Rabbi Binyomin Klein (who, as mentioned above, was the original Lubavitch contact with Rabbi Goldberg) to relay a message in his name. The Rebbe said to tell him that all of Yaakov's Yiddishkeit was in his merit, and just like a father is never jealous of his

**There was a feeling I always had when I came to Crown Heights for the *Pegishos*: as soon as I got close to 770, as soon as I got on Eastern Parkway, a chill went up my spine as I was thinking about all the experiences I had here, and what it meant coming here.**

**"Someone once asked Berel Baumgarten a'h, 'How is it that you guys are so successful? What's your secret?' 'We just tell them the truth...' he answered.**



own son (בכל אדם מתקנא חוץ מבנו), he shouldn't feel slighted that Yaakov couldn't eat with him any more.

But he still didn't feel right. Later on, after Yaakov got married and returned to Penn State, his wife, who was a Hebrew studies teacher, ended up teaching the Goldbergs' two sons bar mitzvah lessons. He felt so indebted to them for strengthening the community, and, specifically, for educating his children in a place where there were no other options for *chinuch*, that finally he was able to make peace with the *cholorv Yisrael* issue. Throughout this entire time—the story stretched over several years—the Rebbe was tracking the story with Yaakov and Rabbi Klein.

### *The Professor*

Yaakov went on to get his PhD and began looking for a job. Here too, he was working with the Rebbe's guidance: In his first year in 770, the Rebbe had called up a few people during the farbrengen on Yud-Beis Tammuz 5722, including Dr. Yitzchok Block and Dr. Avraham Teitelbaum. Then he called up "Professor Jacob Chanukah" and instructed him to become a professor in order to spread Yiddishkeit among the professors. (Thereafter, his moniker in 770 was 'professor.')

Therefore, now that he was beginning his career, he started off looking for teaching jobs in accordance with the Rebbe's directive. However, the job market was very hard at the time—"PhD physicists were driving taxicabs", he later said—and his beard and *yarmulke*, which were a rare sight at the time, helped scare potential employers off. The only offer he received was from a small school in Upstate New York, Hobart college, which had no Jewish infrastructure; the closest city was Rochester, an hour away. The Rebbe told him to turn it down.

Finally, he was offered a job in a company—in industry rather than teaching—and the Rebbe told him to take it. The Rebbe continued pushing him along in his career afterwards as well. "Whenever I would write to the Rebbe or when I had *yechidus*," Dr. Hanoka related, "he never asked me about how I'm doing in learning or how I'm doing in davening. All he wanted to know about was my career."

After a few years, he began working in solar energy, and became very well known in this field, giving talks at international conferences, pioneering many inventions—he eventually held an astonishing 57 (!) patents—and publishing numerous papers. "I think this gave the Rebbe a lot of gratification," he later said. "I didn't discuss this at length with him, but I suspect it did."

At one point, when he was living in Monsey, he was offered a job in Boston, but his wife was concerned that



Boston didn't have the same high level of *chinuch* as Monsey did. However, the Rebbe wasn't worried about the *chinuch* issue; to the contrary, he was "very eager" for him to move to Boston. "I got the impression that the Rebbe felt that my shlichus would be to be in Boston professionally, and also, probably, [the Rebbe told me to move there] because Boston has a larger concentration of Jewish students and Jewish intellectuals than anywhere else in the country."

As he continued rising in his career, he still found the time to arrange the *Pegishos*.

Dr. Hanoka reflected on his work: "We actually changed lives in the short time of a weekend; it was an extraordinary thing to see. There was a feeling I always had when I came to Crown Heights for the *Pegishos*: as soon as I got close to 770, as soon as I got on Eastern Parkway, a chill went up my spine as I was thinking about all the experiences I had here, and what it meant coming here; what it meant to be having these weekends where we could literally change the lives of students.

"These students were often brought up in the same kind of environment I was; they were taught things which were totally different, and contrary, to the Torah's view about the meaning of life, what it means to be a Jew, and so forth. Very often, we found that we just had to tell people what it means to really be Jewish, and when they heard the truth, it made an immediate impression on them. It was pretty earth shaking for a lot of these students to find out about this.

"Someone once asked Berel Baumgarten *a"n*, 'How is it that you guys are so successful? What's your secret?' 'We just tell them the truth...' he answered.

"I think that this is Chabad's success—we're telling people the truth. Chabad is closer to the truth

than anything else, and that is what people want to hear nowadays. There is so much garbage out there, and when people hear the simple, unvarnished truth, they respond to it. It's as simple as that."

## Always about the Rebbe

Notwithstanding his great success in the secular world, Dr. Hanoka's heart was always focused first and foremost on fulfilling the Rebbe's mission. There was once a difference of opinions among shluchim in a certain city, and a person was brought in from headquarters to try ironing things out. The Rebbe instructed him that, before he meets with the involved parties, he should find out what's really going on by talking to three people, whom the Rebbe specified. One of them was Dr. Yaakov Hanoka.

His life was the Rebbe. When he walked back and forth to shul with his children, he would be talking about the Rebbe. His lifelong dream was to have a Beis Chabad in his home; even when it was full of young children and with the help of his wife, his house was always open for *bochurim* to come and use as a home base when they were in the area doing *mitzvot*. He became a prominent proponent of the Rebbe's unapologetic approach in Torah and science, writing many articles and giving many speeches fearlessly articulating this unpopular view to the public. He was a warm Jew with no airs who wouldn't hesitate to say *l'chaim* at a chassidisher farbrengen, notwithstanding his prominent position. He was an incurable optimist, always thinking how to help shluchim in his area, and his greatest *nachas* was when his children went on to become shluchim themselves.

Later on in life, after his career was well established, Dr. Hanoka acquired the ability to live an upper-class lifestyle. But he wouldn't hear of it. He gave all his disposable income—large sums—to his children on shlichus and shluchim in general.

It was a Shabbos when his doctors informed him that there was nothing more they could do; his illness was untreatable. That Motzei Shabbos, he was sitting in the car with his son as they were digesting the somber news. Some people might have been thinking about getting their affairs in order, others might have been thinking about old regrets or shattered hopes. But Dr. Hanoka's mind was somewhere else. He turned to his son, and said, "What is my *avodah* now? What would the Rebbe tell me to do now?" **1**

1. See "Oirah V'Simcha" Derher Adar 5775