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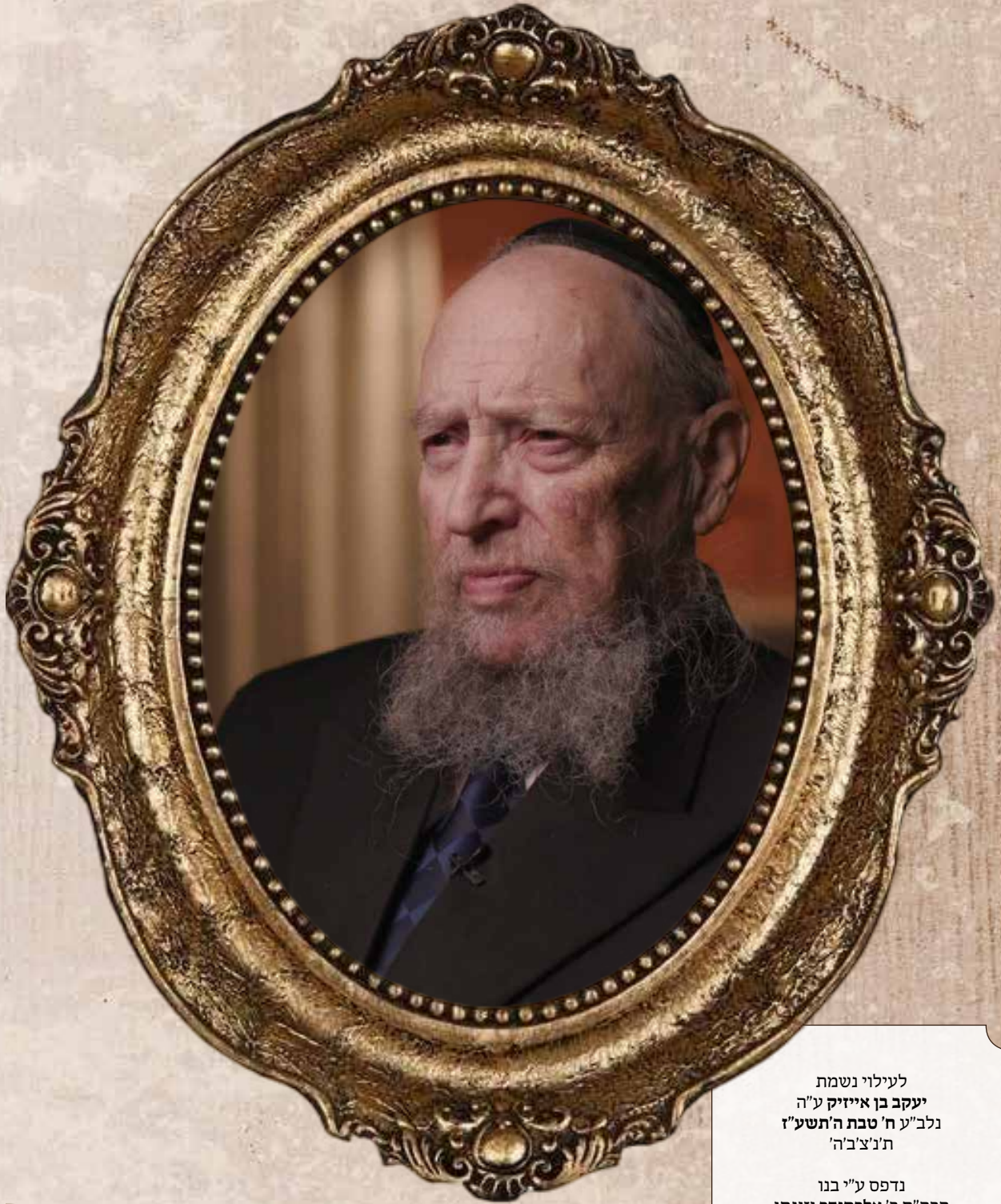
# A DIPLOMA FOR YIDDISHKEIT

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
RABBI ZEV SIROTA



Rabbi Zev Sirota of Flatbush has a fascinating life story. He was *niskarev* to the Rebbe from Yeshiva University, he learned in 770 during the early years, and went on the Rebbe's shlichus in the most unusual of places.

The following is his interview with A Chassidisher Derher.



לעילוי נשמת  
יעקב בן אייזיק ע"ה  
נלב"ע ח' טבת ה'תשע"ז  
תנ"צ'ב'ה'

נדפס ע"י בנו  
הרה"ת ר' אלכסנדר וזוגתו  
מרת חנה ומשפחתם שיחיו  
קאלער

# A BEARDED BOCHUR WALKS INTO YU

I grew up in a *frum* home in Washington Heights, Upper Manhattan, in the years just after the Holocaust, as part of Rabbi Breuer's *kehilla*. The Jewish community was still rebuilding, and the local *frum* schools were in their infancy. Both neighborhood schools—"Soloveitchik" (the more modern one) and "Breuer's," which I attended—ended at eighth grade. My class pushed to continue, so we remained for ninth, but afterward, we had to find new places to learn.

The class scattered: some went to Telz in Cleveland, one to Chasam Sofer. My parents, however, insisted I attend a sophisticated high school that could lead to a solid college education, and so we settled on Yeshiva University.

I was unhappy.

The *limudei kodesh* program at the school was top-notch; they had serious *talmidei chachamim*, like Reb Mendel Zaks (son-in-law of the Chofetz Chaim) and, of course, Reb Yoshe Ber Soloveitchik himself, but the boys at Yeshiva University weren't really *frum*. Many came from Conservative homes in the Bronx or out-of-town and had never experienced high-level Yiddishkeit. They knew about *kashrus* and Shabbos—to their standards—but they were just American boys attending a top-notch Jewish high school. The school didn't have the *rei'ach* of a yeshiva.

One evening, as we were hanging out in the Beis Midrash, someone new walked in. He was a *bochur*—maybe twenty years old—with a beard (!) holding a stack of *seforim*. He introduced himself as Berel Shemtov and said that he wanted to start a *shiur Tanya*.

My interest was immediately piqued. This *bochur* was unlike anyone we had ever seen. He didn't speak a word of English, he wore a full beard without the slightest embarrassment, and in his hands he carried a stack of freshly printed *Tanys*—just published in 5714, for the first time in America. We had heard of *Tanya*, but none of us had ever actually seen one, let alone learned it. It was all a bit exotic and exciting. Together with a small group of four or five friends, we established a weekly *shiur*.

## PERMISSION GRANTED

Reb Berel was a young *bochur* at the time, but he never really changed. If he wanted to accomplish something of the Rebbe's *inyonim*, nothing would stop him. There was nothing that could possibly shame or embarrass him, and

nowhere he wouldn't go. I was very taken by him. He didn't speak English, and we didn't speak Yiddish, but our hearts understood each other.

After a few weeks, the *roshei yeshiva* began hearing the word *Tanya* over and over again, and they caught wind of the *shiur*. They were all Litvaks, and they were not enthusiastic about Chassidus, to say the least; they said, "It's not for us," and categorically forbade the *shiur's* continuation.

Seeing that I was excited, my parents offered to host the *shiur* in our home, but after a few weeks, Rabbi Shemtov got restless. He wanted the *shiur* to grow and spread, and to have a *hashpa'a* on the entire environment, and that wasn't going to happen at our house. He wrote to the Rebbe about the issue, and the Rebbe instructed him to reach out to the head of Yeshiva University himself, Reb Yoshe Ber Soloveitchik.

I don't know whether he personally approached Rav Soloveitchik, but the end of the story was that Rabbi Soloveitchik was an enthusiastic supporter. He said that the *Tanya shiur* could continue—in any classroom, and in any *beis midrash*, at any time of day.

In general, we knew that Rabbi Soloveitchik had very



REB BEREL SHEMTOV AS A BOCHUR, 5716.



YESHIVA UNIVERSITY STUDENTS, 5715.



RABBI SOLOVEITCHIK GIVING A CLASS TO STUDENTS AT YESHIVA UNIVERSITY.

warm feelings for the Rebbe. It was well known that they had been together at university. One of his close students told me that Reb Yoshe Ber would relate how the Rebbe would sit with a sefer hidden under the desk, yet still be able to repeat the entire lecture back to the professor. I also recall hearing that whenever he visited the Rebbe's apartment, he always found the Rebbe standing and learning. Reb Yoshe Ber himself also had some background in learning Chassidus.

In any case, his support was unequivocal, and the *shiur* was reinstated at the yeshiva.

## A NEW WORLD OPENED

Tanya changed my life.

Anyone who starts learning Chassidus knows this experience—an entirely new world opens to you. We were youngsters, but I—and the others—felt that this was something special. We immediately understood that we needed the *limud* in order to function as true Yidden.

There was also the *varemkeit* and the joy of *darkei haChassidus*, which we had never experienced in Washington Heights or Yeshiva University, with their *litvishe kaltkeit* (today, the Litvishe world has learned—in some circles—to adopt the *simcha* of Chassidus and has been *niskarev* to Chassidus to some degree, but they still have plenty to go).

## WHEN THE GATES WERE CLOSED

Every year on Rosh Hashanah, a special parade would take place for Tashlich. We would march in rows of two, singing loudly all the way to the Botanical Gardens, with the Rebbe himself leading the way.

Famously, the Rebbe once climbed over the fence; I was right there when it happened.

There was a terrible downpour that day, but that, of course, didn't faze the Rebbe in the slightest, and the parade went out as usual. We marched through the storm until we reached the Botanical Gardens... only to find the gate shut. No one had imagined that visitors would arrive on such a day.

Without a moment's pause—I was standing right behind him—the Rebbe climbed over the fence and made his way to the water to recite Tashlich.

A few *yungeleit* and *bochurim* scrambled over to follow, but most of us held back. We knew that the Rebbe recites Tashlich very fast; it would be only moments before he came back and began the return to 770. If we were to start climbing over, we would likely miss the return. So we just waited; in short order, the Rebbe came back, climbed back over the gate, and we returned to 770.

It wasn't just a *shiur*. Rabbi Shemtov would farbreng with us and introduce us to *darkei haChassidus*. Each week, he would share a story, and before Yud-Tes Kislev, he taught us *Pada Veshalom*. He also began inviting us to the Rebbe's farbrengens on major occasions, such as Yud-Tes Kislev and Purim. He would let us know when and where to come, wait for us, guide us to a spot, and make sure we were taken care of. He was like an older brother, and I began to feel comfortable in Lubavitch.

I was very taken by the Rebbe.

One aspect that I quickly noticed was that *rabbanim* and *roshei yeshiva*, of whom I had seen plenty, all carried



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A COLLAGE OF PICTURES OF YESHIVA LIFE AT 770 TAKEN IN THE YEAR THAT RABBI ZEV SIROTA CAME TO LEARN THERE.

1. RABBI MENTLICK TAKING ATTENDANCE.
2. BOCHURIM EATING IN THE 'SHALASH' (COURTYARD) OF 770. REB BEREL SHEMTOV IS SEEN AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PHOTO, SECOND TO THE LEFT. IN THE BOTTOM LEFT CORNER IS HIS BROTHER REB AVREMEL.
3. YESHIVA BOCHURIM IN THE ZAL AT 770.

themselves with a certain weight. You always felt their presence, the prestige they projected. With the Rebbe, it was the opposite. He never spoke about himself. When he said Torah, it wasn't, "*Un ich zog azoi*, I say this..." There was no "I" in it at all.

And yet, what came out was breathtaking. The Rebbe would sit calmly at a farbrengen and quote from every corner of Torah—Shas, Rishonim, Acharonim, *seforim* I knew and *seforim* I had never even heard of. My *roshei yeshiva* sat at a table with ten gemaras open. With the Rebbe, you realized you were looking at something entirely different. Over time, we became full-fledged Chassidim.

Then, I had the question of college.

## THE REBBE'S SURPRISING ANSWER

I had spent two years in college at Yeshiva University, where I earned my associate degree, but for my parents, that wasn't enough. They wanted me to finish a full college degree and 'become a mensch.'

This was totally normal at the time. Yiddishkeit was just building up in those years. In 770, there were only seventy *bochurim* when I finally enrolled in 5718—compare that to today, when you can enter 770 and find five hundred bochurim learning Chassidus on any given day. In those days, everyone was going to college. Everything was about '*tachlis*.'

But my heart was already in Lubavitch. I was learning Tanya and other *sifrei Chassidus*, I was attending the Rebbe's farbrengens regularly, and I wanted to take the leap. I wanted to learn in 770.

My parents were not pleased—to put it mildly. After an intense argument, they reached out to the Rebbe's office, reporting my desire and sharing their opposition. "What is going to become of him? How will he ever make a living?"

To my surprise, an answer came back very quickly. I remember hearing Rabbi Hodakov's voice coming through the telephone: The Rebbe said that I should not quit college under any circumstances. I must finish college, "get the diploma, and use the diploma to spread Yiddishkeit."

To be honest, I was a little disappointed, but there was no doubt in my mind that I would fulfill the Rebbe's directive unquestioningly. So, I spent another two years at Yeshiva University—and many years later, as I will soon share, I finally understood the Rebbe's directive.

# ALL THE HEAVY HITTERS

I received my diploma in 5718 and made my way to 770.

At my birthday *yechidus* in early Teves, the Rebbe approved of my joining 770, and said that I should speak to *hanhala* to set me up with a *chavrusa* “*vos past far dir*, who is appropriate for you.” The next day, I met with Rabbi Mentlick and conveyed to him the Rebbe’s instructions.

At the time, with no new *bochurim* my age entering 770, there was no “appropriate *chavrusa*.” Instead, Rabbi Mentlick set me up with a temporary *chavrusa*—Avremel Korf, who would later become the Rebbe’s shliach to Florida.

For me, this was a real catch. Reb Avremel was one of the special chassidische *bochurim* from the ‘previous generation’; he was a good five years older than me, and he had a very good head—he really knew how to learn. I had the pleasure of learning with him for several months, until a new *bochur* appeared in 770 who came from a similar background. Reb Moshe Feller had just transferred over

from Torah Vodaas. He became my *chavrusa*, and we hit it off right away.

Where were we going to sit? I wanted to see the Rebbe coming in and out of 770.

The Rebbe would arrive at 770 on Mondays and Thursdays shortly before *krias haTorah*; on other days, he would come a bit later. In the early evening, the Rebbe would leave 770 for exactly one hour—I would time it—to visit Rebbetzin Chana and to go home for a short while. The only place in the *zal* which allowed sight of the Rebbe’s entrance and exit in the foyer of 770 was the table at the north wall, along the closed double doors that lead to *Mazkirus*, so that’s where we ‘settled.’

Whenever the Rebbe would arrive, we would stand up, and that was the entire *zal*’s cue to stand up as well. We would wait for the Rebbe to pass through, then we would sit down—and the entire *zal* would sit down too.

At the same table sat Arele Chitrik, learning with Mottel Kalmenson, followed by Moshe Bogomilsky and Yosef Abrams. At the far end were Yisroel Friedman and Itche Mayer Hertz. These were all ‘heavy-hitters’; all sharp minds who knew how to learn well, and very chassidische *bochurim*.

## A LETTER FROM NORTH CAROLINA

One year, I went on *Merkos Shlichus* to North Carolina with my friend Avremel Sasonkin.

In those days, we didn’t stay in hotels; we would usually find a frum Yid and stay at his home. But in North Carolina, there wasn’t even a single Orthodox shul! I wasn’t sure what to do, so I opened the phone book, flipped through the Yellow Pages under “clergy,” and spotted a Jewish name.

I called, introduced myself, and he welcomed us warmly.

Our host was an educated man—the rabbi of a large Reform Temple and a professor of Jewish studies at the local college. But he firmly believed that Torah was not *min hashamayim*—and he even taught that in his classes.

We spent hours talking during that visit, and one of our conversations lasted the entire night.

I presented him with several questions. One was about the Torah’s list of animals with only one kosher sign. The Torah names five such animals—and in thousands of years since, no one has ever found a sixth. Isn’t that remarkable? How could Moshe Rabbeinu—or any supposed author—have known that?

He admitted he was aware of the issue but had never studied it properly. “I’ll need to look into it,” he told me.

A few months later, a letter arrived at 770 for me. It was from that rabbi in North Carolina. He wrote that as a result of our discussions, he had come to the conclusion that the Torah is indeed *min hashamayim*. He had kashered his kitchen and was striving to live according to Torah’s dictates. Although he remained the rabbi of his Reform temple and a professor at the college, his outlook—and his life—had undergone a complete transformation.

## STANDING BEFORE THE REBBE

My first *yechidus* was probably for my birthday in 5716, and then every year afterward, I went in again for my birthday. I also had *yechidus* with my wife before our wedding, and later, before we were sent to Nachlas Har Chabad in 5730.

*Yechidus* was always very serious. There was a certain sense of tension before entering the Rebbe's room. I would ask questions and receive answers, but the atmosphere was always reverential—even from the very first time I went in. The Rebbe always treated me like a *chossid*.

Before going into *yechidus* with my *kallah*—who did not come from a Lubavitch family—I prepared her a bit. I told her, “The Rebbe will likely invite you to sit down, but you should remain standing.”

At that *yechidus*, the Rebbe addressed her formally, using “*ir*,” while to me he spoke with the more personal “*du*.” It was very gratifying; to me, it meant that the Rebbe was treating me as someone he was comfortable with, as if I were his child.



RABBI SIROTA (TOP RIGHT CORNER) LOOKS ON AS THE REBBE IS MESADER KIDDUSHIN.

But the real role models were the *eltere bochurim*, characters like Reb Itche Shpringer, Reb Berel Shemtov, Reb Avremel Korf, and Reb Gershon Mendel Garelik. In my eyes, they were giants in *darkei haChassidus*. There was also Reb Avremel Shemtov, who was a bit younger. He had a very sharp mind; during the Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Piekarski's *shiur klali*, Reb Avremel would really give him a hard time. On one occasion, he stumped him so well that Rabbi Piekarski—who had studied at Chachmei Lublin—didn't have what to answer, and he simply closed the Gemara and walked away.

The *sedorim* in 770 were very serious. At eleven o'clock, Rabbi Mentlick would begin taking attendance for *Seder Nigleh*, and it was rumored that the list was submitted to the Rebbe. We didn't need any more encouragement; we were always there on time.

Rabbi Mentlick would attend the two *nigleh sedorim*, and would give a *shiur* in *nigleh* (in the *cheder sheni*) to the youngest class in 770. The *mashgiach* was Reb Dovid Raskin. The official rosh yeshiva was Reb Yaakov Yisrael Piekarski, but he wasn't so involved. He had his own *shul* and other involvements, and would mainly give a *pilpul shiur* once a week. Sometimes he wouldn't prepare well enough, and he would suffer for it. As I mentioned earlier, we had some *bochurim* with very good heads, such as Avremel Shemtov and Zushe Feldman from Kfar Chabad, and they would give him a very hard time.

In Chassidus, the youngest class was taught by Reb Shalom Marosov. Reb Yisrael Jacobson taught the next class, and the highest *shiur* was by Reb Shmuel Levitin. He would also teach a weekly *shiur Tanya* for the last half hour of Chassidus on Thursday night to the entire yeshiva.

I didn't have much of a connection with Reb Shmuel; he had a very heavy accent, and it was difficult to understand him. The main *mashpia* in those days was Rabbi Jacobson. He *farbrenge*d with us countless times, and I was *mekabel* a lot from him. He was a very warm person—he would even travel personally to the pier or the airport to greet new *bochurim* coming from Eretz Yisroel.

## THE PRICE OF EIGHTEEN DOLLARS

In 5721, the Rebbe spoke about the importance of continuing to learn Torah after marriage. At the time,

CHILDREN PLAYING AGAINST  
THE BACKDROP OF THE  
NEWLY ESTABLISHED  
COMMUNITY OF NACHLAS  
HAR CHABAD. EARLY 5730S.



YIMEITMIM

there was no kollel in Crown Heights (in fact, there weren't many *kollelim* anywhere in the world).

Several of us were *chassanim*, and we wrote to the Rebbe asking to be the founding members of a kollel. The Rebbe gave us his approval and *bracha*, and so we established the kollel in the small *vaibershul* of 770, which later became Rabbi Groner's office.

A few weeks later, Rabbi Hodakov called us in. "Listen," he said, "we are paying you eighteen dollars a week. For that money, it's only right that you produce something!"

"Alright," we asked, "what should we do?"

He told us he would speak to the Rebbe and get back to us. A couple of days later, he called us again and said: "The Rebbe wants *mareh mekomos* for Likkutei Torah. However," he added, "these *mareh mekomos* cannot come at the expense of your kollel time. During kollel hours, you must be fully immersed in *nigleh* and Chassidus. The *mareh mekomos* should be prepared in your free time."

So, in effect, we were being paid for the *mareh mekomos*, while the kollel learning itself was, I suppose, for free.

There were no computers then. Every lunch break and every evening at home, we sat with *seforim*, tracking down the sources for whatever the Alter Rebbe cited in Likkutei Torah. In the mornings, we would compare notes.

Every Motzei Shabbos, right after Maariv, one of us would present that week's work to the Rebbe. By rotation,

one of us would knock on the Rebbe's door and hand him the folder. The Rebbe would flip through it quickly, and sometimes stop at a certain point on the page and look up at us—it always felt like the Rebbe's eyes were piercing you—and ask for more details about one *mareh makom* or another. The Rebbe would catch these details incredibly fast.

## "WE NEED PEOPLE LIKE YOU"

In 5731, the Rebbe sent our family to Eretz Yisroel.

Shortly before that time, the Rebbe had founded the neighborhood of Nachlas Har Chabad. As the gates of Russia began to open and emigration became possible, the neighborhood started filling with Russian families, each with different levels of knowledge and *frumkeit*. The Rebbe encouraged families of *anash* to settle there as well, to help strengthen and establish the community.

By the time we arrived, several families were already in place; altogether, about twenty families like ours lived there.

My first position was as administrator of the girls' school. One of my first accomplishments was arranging for the school to be officially recognized by the Department of Education. Until then, they had been running from office



CHIEF RABBI OF THE IDF, RABBI MORDECHAI PIRON, AWARDING RABBI SIROTA.



WITH FELLOW SOLDIERS IN FRONT OF HIS BASE OFFICE.

to office, trying to scrape together small sums of money. With the new status, we were able to streamline the government funding. Because of that success, the boys' school in Nachalah became a branch of the girls' school, which allowed them to receive funding as well.

After some time working at the school in Nachalas Har Chabad, there was a bit of a *machlokes*, and I began looking for other opportunities. I was offered chinuch positions to lead schools in Bat Yam or Holon, but I also started exploring the possibility of enlisting in the army—for a very practical reason.

At the time, I was living in Eretz Yisroel as a non-permanent resident, and I wanted to regularize my legal status and become a citizen. When I inquired at the relevant offices, I was told that to do so, I would need to enlist in the IDF. Given my age, the enlistment would be for six months and would be considered *miluim*—reserve duty.

In those days in Eretz Yisroel (and perhaps even today), this was quite normal. *Bochurim* in yeshiva did not enlist, of course, but it was common to do so later, once they were married. Many men in Kfar Chabad were doing regular reserve duty at the time.

I went through the initial intake process for the army, including psychological testing and a review of my background. They were very impressed. I scored high on the psychological evaluation, and with my college diploma, *semicha* for *rabbanus*, and career in education, I seemed to be a strong candidate.

“We need people like you,” they told me. “Instead of six

months of unpaid reserve duty, we can put you through one month of basic training, and then you can sign up for a year of service as an officer—with full salary. In time, you'll be sent to an officer's course.”

When I heard that, a memory came rushing back. Years earlier, when I wanted to enroll in 770, the Rebbe had instructed me first to obtain a diploma—and to use it to spread Yiddishkeit. The army, I thought, was an incredibly fertile place to spread Yiddishkeit. Perhaps this was the very reason the Rebbe had wanted me to earn that diploma in the first place!

The truth is, my diploma had already come to good use. It was the diploma that helped me enroll in the Nachalas Har Chabad school in the *zerem* of “Mamlachti-Dati” (recognized by Israel's Department of Education). But here, the opportunity was even greater.

I wrote to the Rebbe detailing all the options before me—the chinuch positions in Bat Yam and Holon, as well as the army offer—and the Rebbe circled the army. And so, I became an IDF officer.

## AN OFFICER OF THE SOUL

I began with basic training. For a whole month, I shlepped around—running, jumping, climbing, and of course learning how to shoot an Uzi—all on very little sleep. Everyone else was eighteen; I was already in my early



OFFICIATING AT A MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR IDF FALLEN.



PREPARING A KESUBA.

thirties. It wasn't easy, but I managed to pull through.

At the end of the month, they had me sign on for a year. They told me I would serve as a *rav tzvai*, a military chaplain over a large unit. That was precisely what I had been hoping for. Now I could fulfill the Rebbe's words.

My unit was stationed in the Sinai Desert. It was a renowned unit—the one that had encircled the Egyptian army in the Sinai, paving the way for victory in the Yom Kippur War.

My responsibilities included overseeing kashrus and ensuring Shabbos observance to the extent possible. But most importantly, I held weekly gatherings with each *plughah*. Many of the soldiers were kibbutznikim and others who had grown up knowing nothing about Yiddishkeit. For many, the first time they ever saw tefillin was when they entered the army. Now, every week, I was able to give them a serious talk on the parsha and on Yiddishkeit in general.

I also had countless personal conversations with the soldiers. There were specific times each day when I made myself available for that purpose, and they all knew they could turn to me with their problems. As a result, I developed many close friendships. I even had several conversations about Yiddishkeit with Shimon Peres and Yitzchak Rabin during their visits to the base.

Like other officers, I would return home to my family once a week, alternating between a Shabbos-weekend or a Monday *chufsha*; that's how it went for three years.

## AN AUTHENTIC SHABBOS

One story from my days in the army stands out.

It was Rosh Hashanah and I was stationed at the base in Sharm al-Sheikh. The base was enormous—stretching for miles.

I approached the *ketzin dat* of the navy, the officer in charge of religious affairs (though he himself wasn't very religious), and told him, "The Lubavitcher Rebbe often speaks about *mitvza shofar*—blowing shofar for those who haven't had the chance to hear it in shul. This base is filled with such soldiers, many of whom are on guard duty or other assignments. Let's go do *mitvzoim* together."

He agreed. After we made kiddush and ate following davening that Rosh Hashanah morning, we took a shofar and set out across the base.

During our tour of the base, we came to the holding cells where soldiers were kept after committing violations, awaiting transfer north to be judged by military tribunals. At the time, some forty or fifty soldiers were being held there.

I noticed that the regular officer in charge wasn't present. Instead, there was a replacement officer. I introduced myself and asked if I could speak to the prisoners and blow shofar for them. He was enthusiastic that I had come, and immediately brought all the prisoners out. I spoke with them, blew shofar, and we had an uplifting visit.



RABBI SIROTA PRESENTS THE REBBE WITH A SEFER WRITTEN BY A FAMILY MEMBER.

I couldn't help but notice that the replacement officer himself seemed very engaged in what I was saying. After the prisoners were sent back to their cells, I continued talking with him.

He was a sharp, intelligent fellow. He had recently trained in psychology and was soon to be transferred from the military police to the medical units. We had a fascinating conversation about Yiddishkeit, but time was running short, so I returned on Motzei Yom Tov, and we ended up speaking the entire night. When I finally left his office, it was already daybreak, so I went straight to the Yam Suf and immersed myself in the water for *mikvah*.

He told me that he wanted to experience an "authentic Shabbos." At the time, I was living in Bnei Brak, so I invited him, together with his wife and daughter, to spend Shabbos with us.

I remember feeling uneasy about bringing him to the

Chabad shul on Rechov Avraham where I davened. It was a decrepit shtiebel—wooden benches, broken tables, and lit by kerosene lamps because of a *cheshash chilul Shabbos* with electricity. In a city like Bnei Brak, with so many respectable shuls, I thought it wasn't a fitting place to bring guests. So on Friday night, I took him to a different shul.

But he quickly sensed something was off. After davening, he turned to me and asked, "Is this the *shul* you daven at each week?"

"To tell you the truth," I admitted, "it's not. I daven in a shtiebel with wooden benches and broken tables, where they don't use electricity and they light the room with kerosene lamps. I just wanted you to feel more comfortable."

"No," he said firmly. "I want to experience *your* Shabbos."

So the next morning I brought him to the Chabad *shul*, and he was very moved by the atmosphere—the simplicity, the chassidische davening, the atmosphere—it touched him

profoundly. When we left, his face was glowing.

That Shabbos afternoon, I took him on a walk through Bnei Brak. He was astonished to see an entire city at rest—silent streets without a single car. We stepped into a yeshiva, where he witnessed a sea of *bochurim* in white shirts immersed in learning during the afternoon *seder*. It was a sight unlike anything he had ever seen.

Little by little, he drew closer to Yiddishkeit. I kashered his kitchen, the family began keeping Shabbos, he transferred his daughter to a religious school, and in time, they underwent a complete transformation.

## TRANSFORMATIONS IN TEL MEGIDDO

In the army, the rule was that you had to periodically move up to a new position.

After three years in the army, I heard about an opening in the military police—they needed a chaplain for the toughest prison in their system, the facility for soldiers incarcerated for serious crimes, serving sentences of six months or more.

I thought it would be an excellent fit. There were so many young men there who desperately needed *hashpa'a*, and I felt it was the perfect place for me to have an impact. I completed the required course and became the chaplain at Tel Megiddo.

My work there involved a great deal of speaking and counseling—not only with the prisoners, but also with the officers who worked in the prison. With the prisoners, my main focus was on preparing them for life after release. Whenever someone was nearing the end of his sentence, I would try to convince him to enroll in a baal teshuva yeshiva. Instead of wandering the streets, smoking hashish, and again falling into crime, a yeshiva could provide the stability they needed.

Some agreed—and when they did, I would personally escort them there the moment they were released. I knew that if I just said, “We’ll meet tomorrow,” I would likely never see them again.

We saw very good results.

Once, while riding a bus in Yerushalayim, a young man approached me. “Do you recognize me?” he asked. I didn’t.

So he explained: “I was in the Megiddo prison. You

spoke to me and convinced me to go to yeshiva. Look at me now!”

Two years of learning in yeshiva had so transformed his appearance—his very features—that I hadn’t even recognized him.

## RETIRING FROM SERVICE

Throughout my years in the IDF and in the military police, I wrote to the Rebbe at every significant juncture. Each time I signed on for another two years, it was only with the Rebbe’s approval. I would also share stories of special *hashpa'a*—like the ones I’ve told here—and the Rebbe would respond with *נ"ת נ"ת*.

The work in the military and military police was very intense. After fourteen years, I wrote to the Rebbe that I was tired and wished to retire. I hoped to enroll in a kollel to learn, and to continue influencing people from a calmer, more relaxed place. To be honest, I was nervous—I suspected the Rebbe would not agree. But to my surprise, the Rebbe approved of the plan, and I finally retired from service.

Even after retiring, I maintained many of my connections. Due to my background and experience—as a major in rank with a unique story—I was frequently invited to speak to communities all over the country. From time to time, the army itself would also call me back to perform different functions, and I would happily assist, until our family ultimately moved back to the United States.

## IN CONCLUSION

As I said earlier, I had been quite shocked and surprised when—as a youngster in Yeshiva University—the Rebbe had categorically rejected my plan to join 770. I can still hear Rabbi Hodakov’s voice coming through the telephone receiver to my home—“*beshum ponim v'ofen* he should not leave Yeshiva University.”

At the time, I couldn’t possibly appreciate why, but over the years I came to realize that a *vort* of the Rebbe *vert nisht farfalen*.

“Get the diploma, and use the diploma to spread Yiddishkeit.”

With Hashem’s help, that’s exactly what I did. **T**