



“The Rebbe Was Looking for Someone”

Rabbi Yosef Gopin of Hartford, Connecticut, shared the following stories during the virtual farbrengen celebrating Yud-Aleph Nissan—120 years. They illustrate the extent to which the Rebbe was attuned to each individual even while farbrenging with thousands.

In 5734*, a relative of mine was visiting the United States from Eretz Yisroel after concluding his mandatory army service. Despite his background, he was a troubled youth who was very far from Yiddishkeit and Chassidishkeit and had drawn attention for his misbehavior many times. When he arrived in New York, Rabbi Zalman Shimon Dworkin immediately arranged that he be granted a *yeichidus* with the Rebbe. The Rebbe spoke warmly to him, speaking about his illustrious grandfather and his family, but it had no effect on the young man.

That year was the year of the Yom Kippur War. Shemini Atzeres was some two weeks after the war had broken out in Eretz Yisroel, and at the Rebbe's *hakafos* there were special spiritual actions clearly taking place, with the Rebbe interceding for the Jewish nation during this crisis. Amid this unique *hakafos*, with the fate of Eretz Yisroel hanging in the balance, among the crowd of thousands stood this young man, far from the spot where *hakafos* were taking place.

As the Rebbe went to the first *hakafa*, it was clear that he was searching for someone in the crowd. And then the Rebbe spotted him. The Rebbe waved his arm towards him in a sign of uplifting encouragement. Each time the Rebbe circled around during this *hakafa*, he again waved his arm to this young man. That was the first *hakafa*. Then came the seventh *hakafa*, and once again the Rebbe led the *hakafa* and

again the same thing happened.

The next night, in the space near the *ches*-shaped barrier of tables that surrounded the space where the Rebbe's *hakafos* would take place, there was a commotion. Every inch of room was accounted for, as people would stand for hours before *hakafos* to reserve their *makom kavua* — their “spot.” But a newcomer was here, this young man, and he would not budge from the spot he had taken. People tried to move him, but he was strong and resisted their efforts.

He was determined to be there.

For years afterwards, he stood right near the Rebbe during *hakafos*, and the Rebbe would warmly wave his arm to him.

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On Yud-Aleph Nissan 5737*, when I came home from a long day spent distributing matzah, my wife told me that a man had come to the house and demanded to see the rabbi. “The rabbi isn’t here,” my wife replied. “Come to tonight’s Tanya *shiur* and you can meet him.” The man agreed, and told my wife, “Tell the rabbi that I’m the first Chabadnik here in Hartford.”

And so, at 8:00 p.m. the man came in for the *shiur*, and I started talking with him. “What’s your story, I asked.”

“I grew up in Hartford,” the man — who told me his name is Alexander — explained. “I never knew my father, and my mother couldn’t afford to feed me — I was hungry.



RABBI YOSEF GOPIN

לזכות
החיילת בצבאות ה'
בת שבע רייזל תחי'
לרגל הולדתה י"א שבט ה'תשפ"ג
שנת הקהל

ולזכות הוריה ר' יעקב ישראל
וזוגתו מרת נחמה חי' מושקא
שיחיו מוצקין

נדפס ע"י זקיניה
הרה"ת ר' אברהם יואל וזוגתו
מרת גאלדא ומשפחתם שיחיו
קיעוומאן

We were very poor. One of my mother's friends told her that she, too, struggled to feed her child, and she sent her to New York, to a place called Chabad Lubavitch, to the yeshiva on Bedford and Dean — 'It's a very good school; it's clean, it's warm in the winter, there's good food and good classes. The only problem is that your son might become a religious Jew.' My mother said she wouldn't mind if that happened, and sure enough we took the train to New York, met the *hanhalah*, and I was accepted to yeshiva and given a room." And who were Alexander's two roommates? Two boys who had just come from Russia — Avremel and Berel Lipsker.

For the weekends, the yeshiva would close; the students would go to Crown Heights and stay with families. The arrangement was that the *bochurim* were expected to go to *mikveh* before Shabbos, and to daven in 770.

"As I was on the way to the *mikveh*," the man continued his story, "I met a young man. He asked me my name, where I was from, and so on. We got into a conversation, and this became a habit — I would meet this man on my way to the *mikveh* and we would talk. Then, after a few weeks, I realized who this was — it was the Rebbe."

He went on to tell me that unfortunately, he had left the yeshiva and his life had taken a turn for the worse. But lately, he had begun coming back to Yiddishkeit. He was now married — to a Jewish woman — and had a child, and davened in a *frum shul*. So I told him, "Tonight is Yud-Aleph Nissan. Tomorrow night will be the farbrengen, it's the Rebbe's 75th birthday — you must come!"

"Rabbi, you're crazy," he replied. To travel three hours each way in those days was very uncommon. So of course the Tanya *shiur* that night was all about how important it is to go to the Rebbe, and at the end of the night he told me, "If

I can rearrange my meetings, I'll come with you." At 9:00 he called me and said, "Rabbi, I arranged everything, and I'm going with you."

So we drove to New York that afternoon and arrived at 770, where we met Avremel and Berel Lipsker, who welcomed him and made him feel comfortable. As the farbrengen began, Alexander, who had appeared to be a rather cynical fellow, was quite emotional, even crying.

We traveled home, and this fellow was clearly very affected by the experience. After Pesach, we sat down to write a letter to the Rebbe, detailing Alexander's whole story. Ten days later, I got a letter from the Rebbe, in English, for this man. Rabbi Nissan Mindel, the Rebbe's secretary, had included a request that I should read him the letter and explain it to him.

The Rebbe wrote him a full-page letter, and at the end apologized that he didn't have this man's address, so "I sent it to our mutual friend, Rabbi Gopin."

The Rebbe wrote, "It was a pleasure, after such a long interval, to see you, to receive your letter, and I'm happy to hear that you're married and involved in education. You write to me that you learned in Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim. You should know that this yeshiva was established by *nes'iei Yisroel* — the Rebbe Rashab and his son, my father-in-law the Rebbe — and with *mesiras nefesh*. Therefore, the powers of *mesiras nefesh* are invested in this *mosad*. And therefore, the powers of *mesiras nefesh* are in you. The holiness did not leave its place." The Rebbe then gave him a *bracha* to succeed in fulfilling the mitzvos.

When I got this letter, I wondered, "Is this letter to him, or also to me?" If the Rebbe expects from such a person, who was so far, so much — what can be expected of me? **1**