



To Reach the Littlest Sparks

SHLOSHIM OF RABBI SHMARYA KATZEN

28 TISHREI - OCTOBER 27, 5780



For forty-seven years, Rabbi Shmarya Katzen (1943-2019) taught young children at the United Lubavitcher Yeshiva in Crown Heights. He was interviewed in July of 2018.

My story begins at the University of Maryland, where I was studying chemical engineering and where I was first introduced to Chabad. Although my parents weren't religious, I had grown up in a traditional Jewish atmosphere, and I had gravitated to other Jews at the university, occasionally participating in Hillel House programs. It was there, in 1964, that two graduate students named Larry Levine and Joel Sinski suggested that I explore Chabad.

I had no idea what Chabad was, what Lubavitch was, but I felt very empty inside — something within me was yearning to be satisfied — and I followed their suggestion to go to New York for Shavuot, when we celebrate receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. Arriving at the Chabad Headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway, I sensed the excitement in the air, and I felt like it was only ten minutes ago that G-d gave the Torah to the Children of Israel.

I was warmly welcomed in the home of Rabbi Yossel Goldstein, where I spent the holiday. I found it an amazing experience. I remember sitting at the holiday table while Rabbi Goldstein spoke words of Torah and feeling that something very mystical was going on. He said that every soul comes down into this world with a mission to fulfill, and wherever you find yourself is not by accident, but by an act of Divine Providence — you are supposed to be right there.

After this experience, I returned for a summer program at Chabad to learn more about Judaism, and then went back to the



The Baltimore Sun reports on Rabbi Katzen in a chess tournament at age 16. December 30, 1959.

Courtesy of the Katzen Family

university for the fall term. But something strange was happening to me—I found that I couldn't study. Try as I might to open the books, I couldn't do it. I was drawn to return to New York.

I ended up writing to the Rebbe, telling him that I wanted to leave the university, that I had lost interest and it wasn't for me any longer, but also that I wasn't sure what to do next.

I didn't get an answer right away, so I just packed up and arrived at 770 where I found that the Rebbe's answer was waiting for me. He acknowledged receipt

of my letter, and said he would remember me in his prayers. Then he continued:

The attainment of good is unfortunately not always very easy. And usually, the more the thing is desirable, the more difficult it is to obtain. Therefore, when one finds extraordinary difficulties or obstacles, this in itself is often a sign that the thing desired is very worthwhile. As for a practical solution to your problems, you should discuss them with your local friends who are *yirei shamayim* [that is, G-d-fearing] to whom you could explain all the pertinent details, or who may already know them from experience.

With blessing.

Now, I had already made my decision to leave the university, but I did consult with a friend nonetheless, who recommended that I tell the Rebbe more about my background and my dissatisfaction with secular learning and to ask for a blessing for my *yeshivah* studies.

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ברוקלין, נ. י.

By the Grace of G-d
20th of Marcheshvan, 5725
Brooklyn, N. Y.

Mr. Shemarye Katzen
c/o Joel Sinsky
8329 Grubb Rd.
Silver Springs, Md.

Greeting and Blessing:

I received your letter postdated
October 12th.

As requested, I will remember you in prayer for the fulfillment of your heart's desires for good. The attainment of good is, unfortunately, not always very easy and, usually, the more the thing is desirable, the more difficult it is to obtain. Therefore, when one finds extraordinary difficulties or obstacles, this in itself is often a sign that the thing desired is very worthwhile.

As for the practical solution of your problems, you should discuss them with local friends who are Yirei Shomayim, to whom you could explain all the pertinent details, or who may already know them from experience.

With blessing

By *Nisan Nissel*



Rabbi Katzen in his home
in Baltimore, Maryland in
the early 1960s.

*Courtesy of the
Katzen Family*

I wrote again, and this time the Rebbe responded right away. Among other things, the Rebbe explained to me why I was never satisfied up to this point: “It’s impossible for a Jew to feel satisfied unless he first satisfies his soul.”

I knew that my instincts had been right—I had to sit and learn Torah in order to give my soul what it needed.

As I proceeded with my studies, I wrote to the Rebbe many times, and it was amazing to me how the Rebbe tolerated so many letters from me, and how he always answered.

I recall that in one of my letters I complained that I was always very tired and that I didn’t sleep well at night. This made it hard for me to sit for hours on end and absorb knowledge.

The Rebbe responded that I should see a doctor, and that I begin reciting *Chitas*—the daily selections from the *Chumash* (the Five Books of Moses), *Tehillim* (Psalms) and *Tanya* (the seminal work by the Alter



Rebbe, founder of the Chabad Movement). But even more so he urged me to “be more careful when reciting the bedtime *Shema*.” He was referring to the prayer when we acknowledge the oneness of G-d before going to sleep. I recall that he specifically underlined the phrase “be more careful.”

And ever since — for the last fifty-four years — I have been. It helped me enormously to sleep soundly back then, and to this day I never skip the recitation of the bedtime *Shema*.

AFTER ALMOST A YEAR IN YESHIVAH, my twenty-third birthday came around, and I got an appointment to come into the Rebbe’s office for a birthday blessing, as was the custom. I took this opportunity to confide in him my worries about how I might earn a livelihood in the future. I had been considering taking night courses at a local college, while

Rabbi Katzen receives
kos shel bracha from
the Rebbe.
Motzaei Pesach,
5743-1983

Yossi Melamud,
The Living Archive

studying in *yeshivah* during the day, because I felt I needed to begin acquiring some sort of professional credentials.

But the Rebbe didn't want me to take my energy away from Torah studies after only one year in *yeshivah*. And to allay my worries about the future, he added with a smile, "Right now, G-d is managing to take care of three billion people who have no college education. So probably he can take care of you also."

The audience ended with the Rebbe giving me a blessing to continue learning. And as I was walking out, the Rebbe looked at me sternly and said, "Don't worry, everything will be alright." I took this message to heart.

I met with the Rebbe several times after that, and also wrote him many more letters. Once I recall asking his help with my stuttering. The Rebbe responded — as he did earlier when I asked him about feeling tired and sleeping badly — to see a doctor. But he also wrote that it would be good "for you to strengthen your trust in G-d, who looks after every single individual constantly." And — wouldn't you know — as my trust in G-d improved my stuttering improved.

Rabbi Katzen teaches
Aleph-bet to a child in
the late 1970s.

*Courtesy of the
Katzen Family*





At a different time, I asked the Rebbe what to do when travelling on New York subways, which often presented a challenge to a *yeshivah* student trying to avoid immodest sights. His advice was to memorize verses from the Mishnah or *Tanya* by heart and to recite them to myself when travelling. “This,” he said, “will light up the darkness.”

He often stressed bringing light into dark places, and he said this could be done by thinking or speaking words of Torah.

Rabbi Katzen and his children (in his arms, Nechama Dina) receive coins for charity from the Rebbe outside of 770, as the Rebbe departs to the resting place of his father-in-law, the Previous Rebbe. 13 Tishrei, 5745-1984.

*Levi Freidin,
The Living Archive*

AFTER I HAD BEEN LEARNING IN YESHIVAH FOR A WHILE, I felt the need to go out into the work world, but I was not sure what I should do. As was my way by now, I turned to the Rebbe, who recommended I take an aptitude test which would identify my natural inclinations.

I did so, and the test showed that I would most like to “help people.” But I was not sure what that meant in terms of a profession — should I



Rabbi Katzen poses with
his Pre-1A class in the
late 1970s.

*Courtesy of the
Katzen Family*

become a social worker?

When I informed the Rebbe of the test results, he said, “If you’d like to help others, you should consider becoming a teacher.” He didn’t say what kind of teacher I should be — neither what subjects I should teach, nor whether adults or children. He just said, “You can benefit others by teaching them love and fear of G-d, faith, self-confidence...” — here he paused, adding, “and love for their fellow Jew.” As I recall it, those were the items he listed.

So that is how I became a teacher, which was exactly right for me.

I remember the Rebbe once saying at a *farbrengen* that, when you teach children, it is not only important how many pages of material you cover, but that you reach the *pintele Yid*, the G-dly spark inside each Jewish child. This was especially important in teaching Pre-1A, which is the equivalent of kindergarten in the Lubavitch day school system, where I have taught for forty-two years. I have always tried to reach the *pintele Yid* and to instill in each child an awe of G-d. With the Rebbe’s blessing, I believe I have succeeded. ■



Dear Family and Friends,

We are pleased to present to you our father's narrative of his encounters with the Rebbe, an excerpt from JEM's upcoming book, *My Story* volume 2.

By Divine Providence, in the last year of his life, he agreed to be interviewed and share these stories, many of which he had never spoken about before.

In the final weeks of his life, our father was busy compiling his photos and correspondence with Rebbe, in order for them to be published along with his story.

We are grateful to the JEM team for putting this together in time for his shloshim. We will always treasure these stories, and are very pleased to share them with you.

All our life, our father taught and inspired others. We hope that, by publishing this story, we are assisting him to continue doing this.

The Katzen Family

MY ENCOUNTER
with the REBBE

