

HERE'S my STORY

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WHEN TORAH STUDY GOES INTO OVERTIME

RABBI MAYER PLOTKIN

When I first came to the Chabad yeshivah here in Montreal as a teenager, towards the end of 1958, I was pretty raw. It was my first exposure to Chabad, and Tomchei Temimim of Montreal was a top yeshivah — the students there were studying Talmud and chasidic philosophy (Chasidut) on a serious level.

Later that year, in my first audience with the Rebbe, he made it very clear that he expected me, like all the other yeshivah students, to take my Torah studies very seriously.

In his public addresses, the Rebbe would say that a student should be so devoted to studying Torah that he doesn't even notice the time passing by. "If they could," he once quipped, "they should throw away the clock altogether!" Our official daily schedule ended at 9:30 PM, but if you continued learning until 10:30 PM, so what? Of course, we had to be punctual in coming to class, as the Rebbe once emphasized in a letter to me.

Our legendary Chasidut teacher, Rabbi Zev Greenglass kept a record of our attendance, and he gave us up to five minutes of leeway. Our daily schedule began at 7:30 AM, and if we came past 7:35, he would make a note in his little book. That book went to the Rebbe every couple of weeks — along with a report on the students — and the thought of bad marks being sent to the Rebbe motivated us.

In those years, the concept of yeshivah students engaging in Jewish outreach had barely begun. Instead, the thing that gave the Rebbe the greatest pleasure, or *nachas*, was seeing us totally devoted to Torah study. On one occasion, the Rebbe sent our yeshivah a profound and mystical explanation for why this was so.

It was in 1961, and we traveled to New York to join the Rebbe for the 10th of Shevat — the anniversary of the Previous Rebbe's passing. A gathering would be held for the occasion, an important event, attended by a large crowd including visitors from other communities. But that year, it became apparent that the evening had not been properly organized, much to the Rebbe's consternation.



In previous years, the Rebbe had used this particular gathering to make a fundraising appeal for a special "Torah Fund." The point of this fund, the Rebbe explained, was to, "quietly, without publicity," support people who wished to study Torah "without any commotion, without seeking to make a name for themselves, but simply for its own sake."

Pledge cards would be handed out, and people who wanted to donate would write down their names. This time, however, when the Rebbe made his regular announcement about the cards, nothing happened. A few minutes passed before it became clear that nobody had printed them.

"There aren't any cards?" the Rebbe asked, and he sighed deeply, visibly upset. "It looks like it will have to be cancelled." The Rebbe then recited the after-blessing, picked up his prayer book, and walked out.

Seeing the Rebbe so displeased bothered all of us, and some of the older boys in the yeshivah decided to do something about it. On behalf of all the students, they

continued on reverse

MY ENCOUNTER
with the REBBE

An oral history project dedicated to documenting the life of the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory. The story is one of thousands recorded in over 1,900 videotaped interviews conducted to date. While we have done our utmost to authenticate these stories, they reflect the person's recollection and interpretation of the Rebbe's words.



handed a letter to Rabbi Greenglass, to give to the Rebbe, asking what we could do to bring him some *nachas*.

In his response to Rabbi Greenglass a couple of weeks later, the Rebbe wrote that it was specifically Torah study — and Torah and *mitzvot* more generally, that caused him the greatest pleasure. By way of explanation, he cited the Kabbalistic teaching that “the innermost level of supernal wisdom is the innermost level of supernal delight.” This meant that G-d’s own sense of pleasure — the deepest aspect of G-dliness — extends into the Torah, G-d’s wisdom. When someone works to understand Torah with their own mind, it causes a deep sense of pleasure — both above and below.

“As for the students of Tomchei Temimim,” the Rebbe went on to say, all of this meant “observing the *yeshivah* schedule precisely and, in addition, [studying Torah] in their free time — in such a way, of course, that it does not affect their physical health.”

After receiving this letter, the older boys encouraged us all to spend additional time learning Chasidut in the evenings, and every single student in the *yeshivah* wrote to the Rebbe, informing him of a personal commitment to study more.

Later, after joining the *yeshivah* at 770, I witnessed just how much our Torah study meant to the Rebbe.

In those days, the Rebbe would walk wherever he went. Three times a week, when he would hold private audiences into the morning hours, he had to walk home late at night. So, it was arranged that two *yeshivah* students would stay in 770 until the audiences were over, and they would escort the Rebbe home.

A roster was arranged, and one evening it was my turn along with another fellow. Now, the Rebbe had stipulated that any *yeshivah* student assigned to accompany him had to be studying Torah as they waited; he didn’t want to be the cause for us wasting time. And so we really studied the whole time, perhaps even more on those nights than on a regular day.

So there we were, sitting in the study hall down the hall from the Rebbe’s room, deep into the night. There was nobody else around aside from us and one other student studying in the corner.

His name was Yitzchok “Itchele” Raitport. There were other boys in 770 who may have had sharper minds than Itchele; in this respect he did not stand out. But when it came to the time and effort that he invested in his learning, he far surpassed everybody else in the *yeshivah*. The focus and diligence that he applied to his studies were simply unbelievable.

At two or three in the morning, the audiences came to an end, and as soon as we saw the Rebbe coming out of his office, we jumped up to follow him out. But instead, the Rebbe came over to the door of the study hall and looked inside, while over in the corner Itchele Raitport continued to learn, without noticing a thing. There was a smile on the Rebbe’s face, and you could see the *nachas* he was having from seeing this boy so completely immersed in the study of Torah. For a full few minutes the Rebbe kept on looking at Itchele without taking his eyes off him, while we stood there without moving. Finally, he started for the door, and we followed him.

Not too long after that, Yitzchak Raitport published his first book, containing some of his insights on Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*. Typically, Torah scholars will ask a few prominent rabbis to review their work in advance, so that they can include their approbations at the front of the book, and this one bore a letter from the Rebbe. It began with these words: “For some time now, I have watched and observed your diligence and devotion to Torah study, turning your nights into days, and periodically increasing...”

When people saw this letter, they may have wondered: When did the Rebbe see Yitzchak Raitport spending his nights studying Torah? How did he know that the middle of the night was like daytime for him?

I think I know.

Rabbi Mayer Plotkin is a Montreal-based businessman who has directed many Chabad activities in the area for decades. He was interviewed three times, in the years 2010, 2011, and 2022.

This week in....

לע"נ ר' ישראל יעקב וזוגתו מרת קריינא ע"ה לאקשין
ע"י בניהם ר' נחמן ור' אברהם ומשפחתם שיחיו

> **5721-1961**, the Toldos Aharon Rebbe, Rabbi Avrohom Yitzchok Kohn, visited the Rebbe. After he described how his students wake up at 4 AM, study Talmud for three hours, and then pray with great emotion and fervor, the Rebbe asked, “And what about the study of *chasidut*?” The Rebbe delivered a rich explanation about how studying the inner dimension of Torah (including from non-Chabad sources) before the morning service elevates one’s prayers. The Rebbe’s efforts to persuade his guest to adopt this practice became the main theme of their conversation.¹
26 Shvat

1. *Torat Menachem* vol. 30 p. 317

In loving memory of our dear mother

Sara Rapoport, AH

שרה בת מנחם מענדל ע"ה

Yahrzeit, 23 Shevat, 5760

By her children

Avrohom Yitzchok and **Mina Rifka**

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