

Return II - Resolution of a Confrontation of Beliefs

By Dr. Paul Goldstein

Very few people influence one's life and can effect a change in the lifestyle of another person. Such a statement makes us realize that those people who do indeed serve as models for us must themselves follow a greater cause. Certainly one's parents have a primary effect and, in some cases, teachers may help us explore ourselves. Spouses can help uncover hidden areas never before revealed and one's children, in their honesty and innocence, arouse never before revealed emotions that range from joy to frustration. "YOU" are your own journey and your own adventure. Thus, you also need a path to follow. Some people forge their own paths and some help others find paths that have proven true, have proven to be righteous and have proven to be fulfilling.

My journey has nothing to do with the 15 times I thanked G-d for bringing me through a perilous travel (in a N.Y. taxi) as I passed each of the approximately 15 blocks from Flatbush Ave. to 770 Eastern Parkway (ChaBaD Headquarters). Mine was a special trip for a special occasion — my first farbrengen. The purpose of this article then is to describe, through the eyes of a Jew brought up in the midst of the conservative movement and now returning to more traditional ways, the messages, emotions and results of a farbrengen with the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

Reread the last sentence of the previous paragraph and concentrate on the words "with the Lubavitcher Rebbe." I had heard it; I had been told that at the farbrengen the Rebbe gives each person an individual message and if you are prepared and listen carefully your message, your private audience with the Rebbe, can be experienced. How can this be possible I thought: I am a neophyte in my studies in Torah and Talmud and I am only one person out of 10,000. In fact, I received a very personal message from the Rebbe which helped me feel more at ease with a decision my wife and I had made concerning the education of my eldest daughter. My daughter is five

years old and we decided to send her to the Hebrew Academy instead of the public school. This decision was not easily reached, for many reasons. Nevertheless, it was our feeling that the primary values are the teaching of Yidishkeit in the school and supplemented by learning and doing mitzvot in our home. Yet, I did not feel 100% about not sending her to public school — until after the farbrengen.

The Rebbe told me (and there may have been thousands who received the same message) that I can clothe my daughter in beautiful outfits; I can give her toys and foods and other material things, but this is not enough. After fulfilling my daughter's necessities for physical survival I must teach her to thank Hashem for the life and food that Hashem has provided us. She must learn from my heart the importance of our family and the need to study Torah. This was my message enclosed in the sea of emotion.

Emotions pour forth at a farbrengen (like water from the Well of Miriam). The most prevalent one is JOY and it is experienced on many different levels. The joy I saw in others and felt in myself was best expressed in the eyes of those listening to the Rebbe, in the nigunim (chants) of the crowd and in the eyes of the Rebbe as

he said L'Chayim to each Jew that requested this recognition. Each person felt the joy of understanding (at his level) some of the words of the Rebbe. Perhaps Herman Branover (in his book "Return") best describes the atmosphere present at a farbrengen:

"The atmosphere is always very solemn and ennobling, yet at the same time unbelievably earthy. You feel as if you were at the Beith Hamikdash itself, yet the warmth and ease reminds you more of your father's home...several thousand people happily come to listen to the most profound teaching and stay for a number of hours, many of them standing, keeping prolonged absolute silence. And...overwhelming enthusiasm rallies these thousands of souls into one body! Nowhere else in the world can you see such a phenomenon."

There are other emotions besides Joy that emanate with such power at the farbrengen. Perhaps the most striking are "respect" and "awe" in Hashem and in the Rebbe. I watched carefully many Jews putting on Tefillin. They purposefully removed the Tefillin from the bag, kissed each section as it was placed on their head or arm and, after "davening," they slowly rewound

(with perfection) the yad or rosh and replaced them in the bag. The concentration that filled the shul and the many voices singing "Shema Ysroel" were overwhelming for a person's first experience. Similarly, when the Rebbe enters a crowd of Chassidim there is a rush of love and admiration (in both directions). I truly admire the Rebbe for his great intellect, love and concern for all Jews, but it is his interaction with the children that was so touching. These children receive tzedakah directly from the Rebbe's hand and it is in this act that the Rebbe completes his tzedakah by teaching the children the true meaning of this mitzva. His reaching to children, I feel, is essential, for they are the guarantors of our Torah.

Although the farbrengen officially ends in the wee morning hours, going to sleep afterwards is impossible. My group continued discussions in Yidishkeit until 5:30 a.m. and

even then sleep eluded us. My immediate thought after hearing the Rebbe was "When will I be fortunate enough to hear the Rebbe again and experience the exceptional love in this crowd of Chassidim?" These thoughts continued to occupy my mind as we sat and discussed the meaning of the Rebbe's words.

What is the effect of all this on a Jew who has not followed every halacha (Law) and each mitzva? The answer is direct: You start to follow one additional mitzva each day with the realization that 613 mitzvot/days later you will have elevated yourself and family both spiritually and physically. I started with the mitzva of putting on Tefillin, thus, each day I betrothe myself to G-d and I rejoice in my wife and children.

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