

# HERE'S *my* STORY

## THE ROLE OF A JOURNALIST

SHLOMO SHAMIR

As a foreign correspondent and columnist, I had the privilege to speak with the Rebbe at length, and on many occasions. I wrote about him for *Haaretz* and other Israeli newspapers. It's impossible to describe to today's generation what it was like to sit opposite the Rebbe and to look into his eyes, to hear him speak for two, three hours.

He had such a soft way of speaking. Once I came to see him in the winter - there was snow outside. And afterwards I wrote that his smile could melt all the snow in New York. That's how warm his smile was.

Then there came a time when I did something that erased that smile from his face. In hindsight, I wish I had done things quite differently.

The year was 1979. The Iranian Revolution had just taken place, Ayatollah Khomeini had seized power, and a major international crisis was unfolding. A group of young Islamist militants had attacked the United States Embassy in Tehran and had taken fifty-two Americans hostage. The situation was very tense, and there was a sense of fear in the world.

At a public address on November 17, the Rebbe requested that, because of the situation in Israel and around the world, a public fast day be announced. Even though Chabad is not in favor of fasts, the Rebbe said that if other rabbis should issue a call for a special day of fasting and prayer, he would endorse and support it.

The Rebbe spoke about this several times in the subsequent weeks, and the Rabbinical Alliance of America and many prominent rabbis declared a fast day. It was called for December 13, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of Kislev.



Now, I didn't know that the Rebbe had called for the fast, and for that week's *Algemeiner Journal*, I wrote a column entitled, "Why Fast Now?" in which I asked, "How is the world situation different now than it was a few months ago? Why do we suddenly need a fast? Nothing unusual has happened - the situation was difficult a couple of months ago and it is difficult now."

Rabbi Gershon Jacobson, the editor of the *Algemeiner Journal*, vehemently disagreed with me, and he published a strongly-worded reply to my column entitled, "Why We Must Fast." He wrote: "Shlomo Shamir thinks that a fast won't help, that prayers won't help, but he does not understand why the rabbis called for a fast. His words only harm the cause."

The fast was called for Thursday, and my column and Jacobson's response appeared that very day, unleashing quite a firestorm. Three nights later, on *Motzaei Shabbos*, the Rebbe held a *farbrengen*, and he rebuked me quite severely.

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Now, the Rebbe was always very careful not to alarm people, but here he was very outspoken about the tremendous danger of the situation.

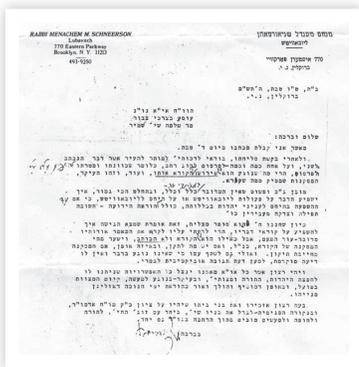


He spoke about the hostages and the crisis between Iran and the US, which he saw as a fundamental turning point. If the Islamists in Iran had the audacity to challenge the United States before the eyes of the entire world, he explained, then America's status as an "untouchable" superpower was under

threat, and that boded ill for the entire world, as it signaled a dangerous step for the Arabs and the Soviet axis. Further, he said, the United States' position was now weakened, and it would feel the need to seek support from Arab countries. That, in turn would endanger the security of Israel.

In addition to all this, Israel had just returned the last of the Sinai oil fields to Egypt, a step which the Rebbe saw as a major threat to Israel's security.

I find it amazing that the Rebbe saw the signs, and anticipated all this in 1979 already. He saw the beginning of the degrading of America's status in the world, how the Arabs would exploit a weakened America, how America would try to appease them, and the danger that this would bring to Israel.



His final point was about the tremendous menace facing the 50,000 Jews of Iran, who were now suddenly under the rule of violent and bloodthirsty Islamists. He said he couldn't speak about the situation publicly in too much detail, but that they were in grave danger.

After learning of this long and passionate talk by the Rebbe, I sent him a letter expressing my regret. I explained that I had no idea that he had supported the fast, and I asked for his forgiveness. I said that I fully believe that, in difficult times,

In gratitude to Hashem for the birth of our son,

# שיחי 'Shomo Aryeh

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fasting and prayer will help, and I apologized for the fact that my column might have, heaven forbid, prevented Jews from doing so.

The Rebbe wrote me a long response, a truly beautiful letter. He said that someone whom G-d granted the talent to write must always remember how people will *interpret* what he writes. The journalist must continually anticipate what the reader will infer from his words.

In our conversations years earlier, the Rebbe would always tell me that a Jew must fully utilize the talents G-d has given him. The Rebbe would say to me, "You have a talent for writing and for action – you must write and act; you must inspire people."

The Rebbe always saw in people their potential, how they could help, how they could better the world. And he always demanded that they use their talents and their knowledge to the fullest. Not to sit still, in despair ... This was one of his cardinal principles – he demanded action.

*Shlomo Shamir is a veteran journalist and political analyst. He was the New York correspondent for the Israeli daily, Haaretz, editor-in-chief of HaDoar, and a long time columnist for the Algemeiner Journal. He was interviewed in his home in the Borough Park section of Brooklyn in September, 2009.*

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

## This week in....

- > **5676—1916**, the Rebbe's first cousin, Menachem Mendel son of Rabbi Shmuel and Gittel Schneerson was born in Nikolayev, Ukraine. The Rebbe wrote letters to him on the occasion of his 9th, 11th and 13th birthdays explaining the significance of each milestone according to Torah and *chasidic* teachings. 24 Elul
- > **5693—1933**, the Rebbe's maternal grandfather, the chief Rabbi of Nikolayev, Rabbi Meir Shlomo Yanovsky passed away. The Rebbe would recite *kaddish* every year in his memory.<sup>1</sup> 23 Elul

<sup>1</sup> Treasures from the Chabad Library, p. 72-73.

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interviews@jemedia.org | myencounterblog.com | 718-774-6000  
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