

# HERE'S *my* STORY

## "DEEP DOWN, A SPARK"

**RABBI ZALMAN POSNER**

In 1941, Chabad opened a *yeshiva* for young boys at its headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn. In those years, Crown Heights was a very affluent Jewish community. There were about a dozen students at the time, and my brother Leibel and I were two of them. I was thirteen years old, and I tell this story from the perspective of a boy.

At that time, it was the custom on Rosh Hashana for those praying at 770 to walk up to the Botanical Gardens off Eastern Parkway to do *tashlich* — a special High Holiday prayer — at the pond there. Everybody — the whole community — walked down the street. How many people that was I cannot tell you, because when you're thirteen you can't estimate crowds. But it was a lot of people.

The Previous Rebbe, Rabbi Yoseph Yitzchok, was Rebbe at the time. The Rebbe was not yet the Rebbe — he was better known then as the Rebbe's younger son-in-law, the Ramash.

So that year, when we started going outside, the Ramash stopped us and said, "Wait, that's not the right way to walk. You should march down the street two-by-two and you should sing." It was unheard of — singing in the street. Nobody sings in the street!

I was very shy and self-effacing, and walking down the street and drawing attention to myself seemed awful to me — I just withered at the thought. All the people in the apartment houses we passed were watching us from their windows. I felt that they were staring directly at me and grinning. I felt terrible, and I was



praying to G-d — the way a thirteen-year-old prays to G-d — to get me out of there.

G-d didn't answer my prayer that year, but the next year, as everybody lined up for the walk, Reb Shmuel Levitin, an elder *chosid*, said to me, "Zalman, I can't keep up with these people, they walk too fast for me. But I don't want to walk alone — will you walk with me?"

And I said to G-d: "You heard my prayer; You answered me!" I didn't have to walk and sing with people looking at me.

I walked with Reb Shmuel and a few other stragglers, and we arrived at the pond and did *tashlich* there. The large crowd was already finished, and were walking back on Union Street still singing. We followed them at a distance. As we were walking, a fellow approached us. He was dressed very nicely in holiday attire — a black suit and white shirt — but he did not

*continued on reverse*

MY ENCOUNTER  
*with the* REBBE

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have a *yarmulke* or a hat on, so he was obviously not a very religious person. This fellow grabbed my arm and asked me, "Why are they singing? Why are they singing?" I mumbled a reply, and then he said to me, "You know something — I have a spark in my soul, and when I heard those people walking down the street and singing because they are proud to be Jews, that spark just *burst* into a flame." And with that he turned and walked away.

I was old enough to realize that this guy was really touched by the singing crowd. It inspired him.



Whatever his rabbi preached on Rosh Hashana didn't touch him — the spark within him wasn't affected. But when he heard people singing, as if to say, "Hurray, I'm a Jew," — that aroused him.

And later on I realized that the Rebbe's younger son-in-law — who later became the Rebbe — knew what he was doing when he said, "March and sing." He was able to see something that the rest of us weren't able to see on our own — that when Jews go out singing in the street, people who are sensitive will respond, perhaps even without realizing it.

Only then could I see that it was worth it — to do all that singing and marching in two rows so that somebody's heart would burst open, and somebody would be able to say, "Hooray, I'm a Jew."

*Rabbi Zalman Posner was the rabbi of Congregation Sherith Israel of Nashville, Tennessee, from 1949, when he was sent there as an emissary of the Previous Rebbe. He is a well-known orator and the author of Think Jewish. He was interviewed in November, 2005.*

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## This week in...

- > **5711 — 1950**, after the conclusion of *Kol Nidrei* and *Maariv*, the Rebbe began reciting the entire book of *Tehilim*. Ever since, it has become the Chabad custom to do so.<sup>1</sup> *Yom Kippur*
- > **5737 — 1976**, during *Neilah*, the Rebbe requested that all boys under the age of Bar Mitzvah "who are able to pray" come to the front of 770 and stand near him during the *Neilah* prayer. The children stood on the Rebbe's platform and the on the floor around it. *Yom Kippur*
- > **5750 - 1989**, after distributing *lekach* until 1 pm, the Rebbe visited the *Ohel*, an unusual custom for the Rebbe on Erev *Yom Kippur*. *9 Tishrei*

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