

# My Teenage Rebellion Was Becoming A Lubavitcher



The *N'shei Chabad Newsletter* interviews **Rabbi Manis Friedman** about his youth.

## **NCN: Can you tell us a little about your background?**

**RMF:** My parents and grandparents were not Lubavitch, but our connection to Lubavitch began in Tashkent. During World War II, hundreds of thousands of Jews fled to Uzbekistan to escape the Holocaust. Lubavitch built a thriving underground yeshivah in Tashkent.

Due to the danger of Soviet spies, people were suspicious of strangers at the time. They were even suspicious of people they knew! So, when my zaide, Reb Meir Yisroel Isser Friedman, arrived in Tashkent, nobody trusted him.

But Reb Peretz Mochkin, the legendary Chabad *chossid*, noticed that my zaide wore a woolen *tallis katan* at

all times. The heat in Tashkent was suffocating, so Reb Peretz concluded, “This man can be trusted.” Reb Peretz borrowed money and bought a knitting machine for my zaide, which helped him make a living and avoid working on Shabbos.

Because my grandfather was a Polish citizen, he was able to leave the Soviet Union after World War II ended and move to America. He settled in Boro Park, but he maintained a relationship with Lubavitch and attended *farbrengens* in Crown Heights. Meanwhile, my parents moved from Tashkent to Prague, where I was born in 1946.

My father, Reb Yaakov Moishe Friedman, was a hero who saved the lives of thousands of Jews by

getting them out of Europe in the postwar years. He worked with the underground Bricha organization. With tremendous *mesirus nefesh*, he arranged false papers for thousands of survivors. He also developed close relationships with the local police in Prague and with the ambassadors of various countries.

On one occasion, my father rescued 500 Jewish orphans who were in non-Jewish orphanages and sent them to Eretz Yisroel. Eventually, however, one of the *bachurim* for whom my father had arranged papers was caught and interrogated. Terrified for his life, he gave my father's name. My father was arrested and imprisoned in Prague.

While my father was in prison, my grandfather, who lived in Boro Park, went to the Frierdiker Rebbe to ask for a *brachah* for his son. The Rebbe said, “What did he do—harm people? He was helping people. They will certainly let him go.”

Shortly afterward, individuals from Bricha went to the Joint (the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, a humanitarian aid organization) to request funds needed to secure my father's release. The man at the Joint echoed the Frierdiker Rebbe's words exactly: “Friedman from Prague? What did he do—harm people? He was helping people. We will certainly give you the money.”

While my father was being tortured and interrogated in prison, he made a *hachlatah* that he would say a certain





The young Manis Friedman standing behind the Rebbe during *davening* (circa 1960).

amount of *Tehillim* every day. My father was in jail for about six months before he was miraculously freed. He continued to say that extra *Tehillim* every day for the rest of his life.

In 1949, when I was three years old, my family immigrated to America. My grandfather used his ties to Lubavitch to help my father get a job at United Lubavitch Yeshivah in Brooklyn. We lived for a while in an apartment in the yeshivah building on Bedford and Dean. Then we lived for many decades in another apartment. In the 1970s, my father considered buying a house on Montgomery Street and asked the Rebbe if it was a good idea.

One winter morning, while still waiting for an answer from the Rebbe, my father received a call from the police. The yeshivah building was on fire—an arson attack. He ran there and spent the entire day dealing with the police, the fire department, and the insurance company. By the time he got home, it was almost sunset. He *davened* quickly and, exhausted, lay down to rest.

Later that night, he received a letter from the Rebbe: “Buying a house is a good idea. That one on 701 Montgomery Street is on the sunny side of the street, so that’s good.” And in large letters at the bottom of the page, the Rebbe wrote: “*Tehillim*?”

That was the only day my father had missed saying his *Tehillim*.

My father bought the house, which my parents lived in together until 2004 when my father passed away; my mother continued living there until her passing in 2017. But the moral of this story is that any *tefillah* you say, or any good deed you do, makes an impression in Heaven. If you stop, it leaves a hole in Heaven. The Rebbe felt that void.



Rabbi Yaakov Moishe and Miriam Friedman with their children. Seated on his father’s lap is Rabbi Manis Friedman; the baby is Mrs. Ita Marcus, and the older girl is Mrs. Faye Kranz-Greene.

My father’s policy was that whenever he went to the Rebbe—whether for dollars, matzah, or *lekach*—he always smiled. The Rebbe once remarked to someone else, “Why doesn’t everyone do that?”

### **If your parents weren’t Lubavitch, how did you become a Lubavitcher?**

My teenage rebellion was becoming a Lubavitcher. My grandfather was not very pleased. He would have preferred to see me in a *shtreimel*.

The first time I went to 770, I was 12 years old. It was 1958, and the Lubavitch community was still small. The Rebbe was *davening Minchah* at his regular place upstairs. There was empty space around him, and since I didn’t know better, I stood right next to him.

I watched the Rebbe *daven*, and when it came to *Modim*, the Rebbe bowed. It struck me deeply. I wondered: Who is he bowing to? Who humbles this great man? That was when Hashem became real to me.

Much later, I learned that a *tzadik* keeps his relationship with Hashem private. Every *tzadik* is really a hidden *tzadik*. During *davening*, just for a second, the Rebbe allowed me to see *emes*, and that moment has never left me.

### **When did you decide to move on *shlichus*?**

When I was a teenager, the idea of going on *shlichus* and bringing Chassidus to the world was so exhilarating that I



couldn't wait. In those days, the only way to go on *shlichus* was to be married—so I was the youngest in my class to get married!

At 22, I married my dear wife, Chanie Gordon, *zol gezunt zein*, and joined the *kollel*. But I must admit, I didn't spend much time there. I had speaking engagements on behalf of Tzach almost daily throughout Long Island, New Jersey, Connecticut, and surrounding areas.

In 1970, Rabbi Moshe Feller came to Crown Heights looking for someone to help him with his *shlichus* in S. Paul, Minnesota. To showcase the beauty of the state, he brought idyllic 8x10 photographs of his Chabad House which was called Lubavitch House. Of course, those photos were taken in the summer. I was naïve and had no idea that a typical Minnesota winter could reach minus 30 degrees.

Rabbi Feller must have heard that I was already involved in *shlichus*, and he offered me the job. There were no conditions, no contract, and no job description. That was *shlichus* 55 years ago—open-ended. Go and do something, whatever you can. The Rebbe approved, so of course we went.

All the original *shluchim*, the pioneers, brought something unique to their *shlichus*. Rabbi Feller was and still is a model for what a head *shliach* should be. Rabbi Feller paid all the *shluchim* he brought to the Midwest. He personally fundraised for them, and on many occasions, if I didn't come to the office to pick up my check, he would drop it off at my house. He never criticized his *shluchim*;

Left photo: Rabbi Manis and Chanie (nee Gordon) Friedman at their wedding.

Right photo: At the wedding (L-R): Reb Yaakov Moische Friedman, the *chassan* Manis Friedman, and Rabbi Sholom Ber Gordon. Seen in background: Reb Avi Baitelman, the *chassan's* new brother-in-law.

he didn't see himself as a *mashpia* or a policeman. And he never missed an opportunity to compliment them publicly, taking great pleasure in their success.

The Rebbe once shared a story about Rabbi Feller and his encounter with Sandy Koufax, the Jewish baseball star who famously refused to pitch on Yom Kippur in a World Series game. Describing how Rabbi Feller went to visit Koufax in his hotel room, the Rebbe said with a smile, "*Er hot bei mir nisht gefregt*"—he didn't ask me. The Rebbe appreciated that Rabbi Feller took initiative, confident that this would please the Rebbe.

Rabbi Feller's sincerity and *yiras Shamayim* impressed many famous people, including Professor Velvel Green (a NASA scientist who wrote extensively about the harmony between Torah and science) and Professor Paul Rosenbloom (a mathematician whom the Rebbe asked to complete the mathematical papers begun by the Rebbe's brother).



1. L-R: Rabbis Manis Friedman, Asher Zeilingold, Moshe Feller, Rudy Perpich (former governor of Minnesota), Rabbis Gershon Grossbaum, and Shlomo Bendet.

2. Rabbi Manis Friedman (holding a Sefer Torah) and Rabbi Moshe Feller.

3. Standing L-R: Rabbis Yosef Shagalow, Mendy Lew, Mendel Katzman, and Dovid Greene. Sitting L-R: Rabbis Gershon Grossbaum, Moishe Kasowitz, Moshe Feller, Manis Friedman, Shlomo Bendet.

4. L-R: Mrs. Chavie Bendet, Mrs. Chanie Friedman, Mrs. Ruchie Grossbaum, Mrs. Mindy Feller, honorees Pam and Buddy Brin, Rabbi Moshe Feller, Rabbi Manis Friedman, Rabbi Shlomo Bendet, and Rabbi Gershon Grossbaum.

5. A glowing article about Lubavitch House published in *The Minneapolis Star* in 1974.

6. L-R: Rabbis Moshe Feller, Asher Zeilingold, Manis Friedman, and his father-in-law Sholom Ber Gordon. (Images courtesy of the Feller family.)

Working with Rabbi Feller was—and still is—a pleasure and a privilege, even after 55 years. He is creative, devoted, and sincere. He came up with the original idea (now so common it seems obvious) to bring 30 pairs of *tefillin* to a BBYO (B'nai B'rith Youth Organization) convention and encourage hundreds of Jewish teenagers to put on tefillin.

Rabbi Feller once published a series of articles in *The Jewish Press* about his experiences as a *bachur* on *shlichus* in South America. The Rebbe personally edited each article. These articles are now being compiled into a book titled *We Travel to Educate*, which I highly recommend to NCN readers.

### Can you tell us the story behind the birth of Bais Chana?

It was 1970, my first summer in Minnesota. I was sitting with Rabbi Feller in Lubavitch House, and the big, beautiful building was empty. The kids were away at camp, and locals were in their summer homes.

We were talking and jokingly said, “There are two yeshivos for *baalei teshuvah* men—Hadar Torah and Kfar Chabad. But who are these men going to marry? Maybe we should make a program for women!”

Somehow, that joke became reality. We sent flyers to six Midwestern campuses inviting Jewish women to spend the summer with us. “Come and learn the purpose of life,” we advertised.

We had four Bais Rivkah high school students with us for the summer running our Gan Yisroel day camp. We figured these college girls would come looking for a vacation—they would shop, sight-see, enjoy the pool in the backyard—and at the end of the camp day, the Bais Rivkah girls would teach them. I never imagined I would be teaching. That wasn't the plan.

But on the first day of the program, 18 women showed up



at our door. They walked in so militantly that we were all a little afraid of them. They were former members of SDS—Students for a Democratic Society. They were radicals who had wanted to change the world and stop the Vietnam War... and they had failed in their social justice mission. Now they were frustrated and angry. Our flyer had piqued their interest.

They said, “You think you know the purpose of life?”

The plan had to change very quickly. These women were not the type to shop or sight-see—they wanted revolution!

So, I ended up teaching. Midway through the program, we brought out *madrichos*. I taught a class in the morning, then the *madrichos* would teach, and then I gave an evening class.

From the 18 women that first summer, 14 went to Crown Heights to continue their Torah studies. There were no schools for them, so they went to Bais Rivkah elementary school to learn Alef-Bais. The Rebbe told someone in *yechidus* to send his daughter to Minnesota, saying, “I don't know exactly what they are doing there, but they are successful.”

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Rabbi Manis Friedman teaching in Lubavitch House of Minnesota in 2005.

At first, we called our program The Women’s Institute for Jewish Learning. We later renamed it Bais Chana, after the Rebbe’s mother, with the Rebbe’s permission. The second summer, we had 42 students. Then we hosted our first winter session during college break, and 102 women joined. The program was exploding. We bought triple bunk beds and sleeping bags to accommodate everyone.

One of our students, Sara Leah Helfand (now Krinsky), had the idea of making our *Tanya* lessons available to the general public. Rabbi Gershon Grossbaum was already taping the classes, but they were just for the women in our program. Sara Leah produced them in bulk, designed a beautiful album cover, and got them into Jewish stores. We asked the Rebbe if we could put his mother Rebbetzin Chana’s picture on the album cover. We also wrote that we hoped it would bring the Rebbe *nachas*.

The Rebbe underlined the word “*nachas*” and added “*harbei*”—much. He also wrote, “Surely you are working with professionals to produce these tapes.” Of course, the professional was Sara Leah!

And so, Minnesota became a center for Jewish learning—who would have believed it? Women came from Eretz Yisroel to S. Paul, Minnesota, to learn Chassidus! Rebbetzin Mindel Feller served as dorm mother. Rebbetzin Nechama Baumgarten, Rebbetzin Yehudis Groner, and Rebbetzin Sarah Chanin were instrumental in developing the program and taking care of the students.

In the early years, many of the women who joined were hippies. Sometimes they brought their babies with them. They were very health-conscious and didn’t want their kids to eat anything unhealthy. I still remember Rebbetzin Chanin saying in her Russian accent, “*Gib ir dee cookeh!*”—she insisted the children would be just fine even if they ate cookies.

In those days (and for many decades after those days), Rebbetzin Laya Klein led an annual Shabbaton, known as the Pegisha, for female college students in Crown Heights. At the end of the Shabbaton, Rabbi Nosson Gurary, the legendary campus *shliach* from Buffalo, would make a speech. He said there was

a benefactor named Mr. Pfefferkorn who was sponsoring tickets to Minnesota for anyone who wanted to join Bais Chana. Many students grabbed the opportunity and got on a plane directly from Crown Heights to Minnesota.

Afterwards, Rabbi Gurary wrote to the Rebbe, and the Rebbe sent him money for these tickets. It turned out there was no Mr. Pfefferkorn.

One summer, while classes were in session, we got a phone call from Rabbi Moishe Kotlarsky. He said he had a stopover in Minnesota, and his flight had been delayed—could he come visit? We picked him up, brought him to Lubavitch House, and showed him around.

Many years later, we discovered that he hadn’t actually had a stopover in Minnesota. The Rebbe had sent him on a secret mission, with a long list of things to check about our program: how many students there were, who was teaching, what subjects were covered, whether the food was good, what the schedule was... The Rebbe was interested in both the *ruchnius* and *gashmius* details.

One of the subjects our students were most interested in was *tznius* and women’s roles in society. One of our students, Jenna Morris Breningstall, said, “I could write a whole book on this topic, just from all you’ve said in the past few weeks.” And she did; that’s how the book *Doesn’t Anyone Blush Anymore?* was born. Soon after that, I was speaking at a Chabad House in San Francisco about *tznius*. I wasn’t aware that in the audience was

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an editor from Harper San Francisco. After the talk, he said, "Why don't you write a book? If you can speak about modesty in San Francisco, I want to publish it!"

We gave him the book Mrs. Breningstall had written. It became a national bestseller. I was invited to popular talk shows and interviewed by many magazines. The book was endorsed by Bob Dylan and featured in *Rolling Stone Magazine*. Why? Because truth has a way of penetrating darkness.

It's been 56 years since that fateful summer of 1970, and we've merited to teach many thousands of women, helping them reclaim their Jewish identity and birthright. Today, Bais Chana has programs around the country, offering about 15 sessions a year—separate sessions for teens, college students, single mothers, women of all ages and women 55-plus— and a growing presence online with daily, weekly, and monthly classes. With the Rebbe's *brachos*, Bais Chana continues to transform lives with the power of Toras HaChassidus.

**Let's shift to the topic of *chinuch*. What do you think about the parenting approach of "connection over correction"? If a child is going off the *derech*, should we continue to love them instead of trying to correct them?**

Children don't need love as much as they need to be needed and respected. You can claim that you love your children no matter what, but 1) that may not be 100% true, and 2) it's not what they need to hear. Love for a child is natural, but it's not always unconditional.

Saying "I love you no matter what" is in a way dismissive. It tells a child that their actions and words don't matter. Rather, a parent should say, "I am your parent, no matter what." Being a parent is a fact, not a feeling. It's an indisputable, unconditional truth.

I wouldn't be surprised if children who hear "I love you no matter what" intentionally act badly to see how their parents react—to test the boundaries of so-called unconditional love.

Children prefer when parents are clear about what they approve of and don't approve of. They want truth most of all. When I'm lovable, love me. When I'm not, don't.

You can have the deepest connection with your children by being their moral guide—mentoring them through childhood and helping them discern right from wrong. That connection lasts a lifetime.

Rudy Boschwitz, former senator of Minnesota, had a close relationship with Rabbi Moshe Feller. One day, Rabbi Feller said, "All these years I've been calling you by your first name, but you still call me Rabbi

Feller. Please, call me Moshe.” Senator Boschwitz thought for a minute, and then said, “I don’t think so. My father would not approve.”

He was a millionaire and a powerful politician, but his father’s values, one of which was *eidelkeit*, were still important to him. That’s the power of *chinuch*.

One of my pivotal childhood memories happened when I was about 11 years old, in the kitchen of my home. My great-uncle Reb Chaim Friedman was there. He was a lonely man who never had children. His wife was ill for many years, so he came to us often for dinner, but he spoke very little.

I was sitting at the table with my back to the sink, and my mother was standing near the sink. I innocently stuck my hand out and said, “Ma, can I have a spoon?”

My gentle, quiet uncle went purple with shock and said, “*Banutzinzich mit di mammen?!—you are USING your mother?!—*

It was not in his nature to give anyone *mussar*; he just reacted with genuine distress. From that time on, I never asked my mother for anything I could do for myself.

Connection happens *through* correction.

### Can you tell us about your new book, *Divinely Vulnerable*, that is coming out soon?

There is a recurring theme in the Rebbe’s *maamarim*, a lesson that is counterintuitive to our vision of a perfect, untouchable G-d. The Rebbe explains that Torah and Bnei Yisroel are indispensable to Hashem Himself. He not only loves us, but He needs us. We are eternally bound.

When the Jews were in Mitzrayim, they fell to the lowest spiritual planes. The Satan asked Hashem, “Why take them out of Mitzrayim? They are worshipping idols!” In other words: Why not give up on these sinning people and replace them with a better nation?

Hashem replied, “*Bein kach unbein kach bonai heim*”—whether they serve idols or not, they are my children. “*Ulihachlifum b’umah acheres eini yachol*”—and to exchange them for another nation is simply not possible for Me.

My book *Divinely Vulnerable* explores what it means that we are essential to Hashem. If we realize how He needs us and depends on us, the *mitzvah* to love Hashem becomes realistic. It becomes doable. Because to love

someone perfect, someone without any needs, is unrealistic. But when we realize Hashem not only loves us, but is vulnerable because He depends on us, that changes everything. For there is no love without vulnerability.

The love of the Jewish people to Hashem is equally unstoppable, rooted in this two-way need.

In the writings of Tzvi Kolitz, he describes a heartbreaking scene of a Jew who was murdered during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. As he awaited his inevitable end, he wrote a note—his last will and testament. In the letter, he describes the cruelty, the starvation, and the devastation of the ghetto. He grapples with faith, trying to understand why Hashem has hidden His kindness. But he concludes: “I die at peace but not pacified, conquered and beaten but not enslaved, bitter but not disappointed, a believer but not a supplicant, a lover of G-d but not His blind amen-sayer.

“I have followed Him, even when He pushed me away. I have obeyed His commandments, even when He scourged me for it. I have loved Him, I have been in love with Him and remained so, even when He made me lower than the dust, tormented me to death, abandoned me to shame and mockery...

“Here, then, are my last words to You, my angry G-d: None of this will avail You in the least! You have done everything to make me lose my faith in You, to make me cease to believe in You. But

I die exactly as I have lived, an unshakeable believer in You. Praised be forever the G-d of the dead, the G-d of vengeance, of truth and judgment, Who will soon unveil His face to the world again and shake its foundations with His almighty voice. *Shema Yisroel!* Hear O Israel! The L-d is our G-d, the L-d is one. Into Your hands, O L-d, I commend my soul.” ❁

For 50 years and counting, **RABBI MANIS FRIEDMAN** has taught audiences around the globe about Hashem and His Torah, about the Rebbe and Chassidus. Known as YouTube’s most popular rabbi, his library of online lectures spans thousands of hours. Explore more at [itsgoodtoknow.org](http://itsgoodtoknow.org).

