



# The **BOYS** from **LONDON**

RABBI MENDY DEITSCH

**A**s our class was preparing for our bar mitzvahs (1986/5746) we were notified that a group of Lubavitcher boys from London, England, who were also preparing for their bar mitzvahs, would be joining us in Oholei Torah of Crown Heights for a few weeks. Our teacher instructed us that we should be nice, kind, and welcoming to these boys, many of whom were coming for the first time to see the Rebbe and bask in his presence. We were told that each of us would be paired with a boy from London, to partner with him and show him around the neighborhood and the community and take care of him as needed.

We were a little apprehensive and uncertain about how it would work out. We were also excited for this adventure. We didn't know what to expect.

After all, for our entire lives we pretty much knew the same Lubavitcher children our age and could not imagine there was a world outside of Oholei Torah, Lubavitcher Yeshivah of

Ocean Parkway or Camp Gan Yisrael, although of course we were exposed and introduced to children from other communities, like in camp and on trips. But London, England, was a far-off place across the Atlantic, and people from there spoke with an accent, said different words, and came from a whole different culture.

These Lubavitcher boys who were coming now did not grow up with the same background as us in 770 and around *chassidim*, or at least that is what we thought.

When the boys arrived, they were brought into our classroom and introduced to us. We were outspoken, brash, in-your-face New Yorkers. These were reserved, quiet, proper Londoners. Although they had just traveled overseas, they were neat, clean, and tucked in. It felt to us as if they were from a different planet.

One was wearing a European little hat. Another had his shirt buttoned all the way up to the top button. The contrast between them and us could not have been sharper.

We welcomed them, introduced ourselves, and shared a little bit about what it meant for us to live and learn right near the Rebbe. To our great surprise, these boys knew a lot more about it than we knew. After all, we grew up seeing the Rebbe, we lived blocks away, we saw the Rebbe coming and going to and from 770, and *davened* on Shabbos right by the Rebbe, yet these kids knew the details, the nuances, the schedule of what was happening in the holy environment, when and for what reason certain events and gatherings happened. We lived it, but they internalized it.

For us, we realized, it was just a part of life that we took for granted. We made no effort to understand or appreciate what we had, but these boys... they may have looked different, they may have grown up in a different culture than we grew up in Crown Heights, but their Lubavitcher foundation, their connection to the Rebbe, was by far deeper than ours, and we quickly understood that we had a lot of catching up to do.



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We may have thought that we would be teaching them, but as it turned out, they inspired us to improve not only in our conduct and our schedules, but also in our connection with the teachings of the Rebbe, and to deeply absorb and appreciate the *farbrengens* and the *simchah*. Even the *niggunim* that were sung were no longer just things that happened without us paying much attention, but intentional lessons for our daily lives as *chassidim* no matter where we may live.

They knew it, they felt it deeply, they embraced it. How embarrassed we were that we were not at that level, while we certainly should have been.

And while at first we thought that they were quiet and reserved, it turned out that they were sharp, articulate, clear, and not shy at all. When we went to Manhattan on *mivtza'im* together with them, they were quite comfortable asking people if they were Jewish and inviting them to do a *mitzvah*.

It was a beautiful coming together of

*chassidim* from different walks of life. We were able to learn together, to play together, to build strong friendships. More than anything, the experience taught us that although we live close to the river, we did not always drink from its waters.

We realized that we could not take it for granted and that each day with the Rebbe was a precious gift that we were given.

Sometimes it takes a boy in a schoolboy hat with a puffy shirt to put you in your place and remind you of the gift that you have right in your front yard.

Sometimes it takes an unexpected guest from across the world to teach it to you.

They lived what it means to be a *chossid* in the modern world. They breathed it. They engaged in it, spoke about it, analyzed it, and lived it.

After a few weeks, when they left back to London, we were a changed class. We took our learning more seriously.

We took our engagement with the Rebbe's *inyanim* more seriously and our connection with the Rebbe much more seriously. We no longer took for granted the things that we used to take for granted, and we began to appreciate every moment, every encounter, and every connection with the Rebbe and with *chassidim*.

The highlight was going into the semi-private *yechidus* with the Rebbe for our bar mitzvahs. By Shvat 1986/5746, there were no longer private *yechidus'n* with the Rebbe for bar and bas mitzvah kids.

What we had was a general/individual semi-private audience. We grew up hearing about what it means to have a *yechidus* with the Rebbe and how one prepared for that, the impressions and lessons the Rebbe gave each bar mitzvah boy and bas mitzvah girl and their families. We heard how *yechidus* lasted into the wee hours of the morning.

Even though we knew that that type



Rabbi Mendy Deitsch at a *chassidishe farbrengen* with his son Sholom.



Mendy Deitsch at his bar mitzvah on 28 Adar Aleph 5746 (March 9, 1986).

of *yechidus* had stopped, we prepared for it as if we were going in alone to the Rebbe. We learned, made *hachlatos*, went to the *mikveh*, said *Tehillim*, and did what we needed to do to prepare for our *yechidus*.

We wrote a *pahn* (*pidyon nefesh*) to the Rebbe once, twice, three times until it was perfect, asking for a *brachah* to grow up to be a *chossid*, a *yirei Shamayim*, and a *lamdan*.

Having spent time with the boys from London, we now had a better understanding of what to write and what to wish for: to be like a *chossid* who may live far but is truly close, who may not be growing up around the same *eltere chassidim* we had in Crown Heights but who learn from and emulate their own admirable *chassidim*.

It was intense, getting ready for the *yechidus*. There would be a small crowd, only the bar mitzvah boys and their families and the bas mitzvah girls and their families downstairs in 770, divided by only a table on each side with a pathway to walk through after giving the Rebbe your *pahn* and

receiving a dollar for *tzedakah*.

The Rebbe entered the room at 8:00 p.m., first for the guests who had come for Yud Shvat, and then the bar and bas mitzvah children, and then the *chassanim* and *kallahs*.

What did the Rebbe say to us?

He said that just as when the Beis Hamikdash was built, each person who donated was blessed with much success, so too we are beginning a new life where we are making a dwelling place for Hashem within us, and by doing so in a good way Hashem *bentches* us with success in every area of life. He gives us *brachos* and specific gifts to be able to accomplish our individual missions.

And therefore, the Rebbe said, we have to appreciate all of our *mechanchim* who led us to this day. The parents and grandparents are also blessed because they took part in educating us in the ways of Torah and *mitzvos*.

It probably lasted no more than 15 to 20 minutes, but for us, this group *yechidus* was very powerful—to be in the presence of the Rebbe and to receive his *brachos*.

When it was time for our new friends to leave, we realized and appreciated the valuable education that we had received, and since then, we have remained friends through our yeshivah years and beyond, because the connection between one *chossid* and another is never broken.

It is interesting at first, and then enlightening, and even inspiring—and ultimately humbling—to realize how many young *chassidim* of today know more about the details of the Rebbe's conduct than those of us who had the *zechus* to be present with the Rebbe!

And it proves that even in this time of darkness, of *galus*, we still have the opportunity to live with the light and joy that the Rebbe gives us each and every day.

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