

From: <http://www.ascentofsafed.com> Story #1169 (5780-32) 10 Iyar 5780 (May 2020)

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## ***A Budding Engineer in Search of Meaning***

**Rabbi Meir Bastomski** was born in Vilna in 1941, in the midst of World War Two. After the war his family moved to Israel, and he grew up in the city of Haifa, known as the “Red City” for its Communist-atheist atmosphere. Judaism was nowhere on his agenda. After he finished his army service, his father urged him to pursue a degree in mechanical engineering at the prestigious Haifa Technion. Not only did Meir attain the highest grades but, after graduation, was wooed by several large companies.

But something was missing. A voracious reader, he had taught himself about almost everything under the sun. It was all very interesting. He had never felt that his engineering career, successful as it was, would fill the hole in his life and the world. He wanted more. But what?

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At the Technion, he had met a student named Shmuel Katan, who was connected with Chabad, and this association led him to draw close to two local and well known Chabad Chassidim, Rabbi Yechiel-Michael Dubruskin and Rabbi Reuven Dunin, who might better give him attention and possibly all the answers.

His two new teachers came from the opposite backgrounds. Rabbi Dubruskin was a Talmudic prodigy from a long line of rabbis, while Rabbi Dunin was a tractor driver brought up in a Communist kibbutz. Meir spent hours arguing with them until, slowly, he suspected that maybe Judaism had the answers and anyhow certainly wasn't just another religion. He even considered, much to his father's consternation, taking on a few of the commandments.

Slowly but surely, he moved toward Torah observance. Meanwhile, his father, who had pushed him to become an engineer, had great hopes for his success. But Meir felt he needed to fill the great gap in his Torah knowledge. Feeling himself at a crossroads, he decided to try the yeshiva in Kfar Chabad (one train stop from Tel Aviv) for a few months.

All the while, Rabbi Dunin was urging him to go to New York and seek advice from the Rebbe. However, he wasn't totally convinced. Therefore his two teachers suggested that he visit the headquarters of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in New York for the month of Tishrei. This was 1966, when such visits were not common, but neither was Meir Bastomski. He had to know what Judaism was really about.

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As soon as he arrived, he was enthralled. The atmosphere in the Rebbe's synagogue was something fresh and vibrant that he had never experienced. He enrolled in the yeshiva there and immersed myself completely, learning day and night very seriously, because he felt that he had to learn a lot of material in a short time.

The young men there were friendly, lively and open-minded. Much of the day was spent learning and discussing the intricacies of the Talmud, as well as the Rebbe's responsa to questions just like the ones that had been bothering him.

The time passed quickly. He pushed off his return home several times during the nine months he studied there. Finally, towards the end of the year, a *yechidus*, a private meeting, was arranged with the Rebbe. Little did he realize then that it would shape the rest of his life.

He entered armed with three questions to ask, but when he actually stood before the Rebbe he completely forgot them. The Rebbe's face and eyes were something that took him by surprise. But then, the Rebbe greeted him warmly and suddenly Meir remembered.

His first question: "Why do I have such an affinity to the ideas of Chabad Chasidism? Could it be possible that somewhere in my family tree there had been such followers?"

The Rebbe did not reply. So Meir understood that he was the first.

The second question was more serious. "My father had a severe heart condition; the doctors gave him, at most, two or three years to live and warned that any emotional strain could be fatal. But my father is also a staunch atheist. Who knows what will happen if I come home with a black hat and a full beard!"

The Rebbe responded that he should not touch his beard under any circumstances. He gave him a deep and fascinating explanation about the beard and its essence, according to *Halacha* (Jewish Law), Kabbalah and Chasidut.

The Rebbe then answered Meir's question directly. "Do not worry. If you arrive home with an attitude of compromise, it will encourage arguments and complaints from your father. But if you come with a firm decision to do what is true and right, will not this be harmful. Just the opposite, in fact — clinging to your principles is what will make your father happy and healthy." He then blessed his father with a long, healthy, happy life.

The third question addressed his main dilemma. A bright, lucrative future awaited him in Israel as a mechanical engineer. But he felt more drawn to Judaism. Therefore,

“Rebbe, what should I do when I return to Israel?”

The Rebbe’s answer startled him. “If money is of foremost importance, then you should work as an engineer. But if money is not the main thing, you should be a teacher.”

“A teacher?” Meir thought. It was something that had always been in the back of his mind, but he had no training or experience in anything other than engineering.

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One month later he returned to Israel and, just as the Rebbe had said, when his father viewed his adherence to his beliefs he actually seemed relieved that his son had found himself. But there was a bigger problem—telling his father about the decision to become a teacher. Here he was, ready to toss away his diploma and everything he had worked and hoped for all these years. If the beard didn't kill him, this news certainly would.

Meir was referred to two chasidim in Kfar Chabad, Rabbi Moshe Naparstek and Rabbi Shlomo-Chaim Kesselman, both of whom decided that nothing would be more fitting for Meir than a teaching career, and if he did what the Rebbe said, for sure nothing bad could occur.

So Meir braced himself, chanted a few prayers, practiced smiling and returned to his father to break the news.

“Dad,” he began, watching his father closely for signs of distress or chest pain. “You know, the Lubavitcher Rebbe gave me some advice and, well, I talked to other rabbis and I decided that I'm not going to be an engineer.

“Dad, I love you and I want to do what's right. But I decided I'm going to try to be a teacher. I want to teach young people Torah.”

His father fell silent and a slight smile appeared on his lips. “Just wait right here,” he said, while he went into another room, opened a closet, and searched through some papers.

He returned with some sort of folder. “Open it.”

As Meir was opening it his father explained, “I don't know if you remember, but over ten years ago you took an aptitude test. I never told you the results. I really wanted you to be an engineer, to make a good wage and be secure, and I was sure that was what the test would show.

“But it didn't. It showed that you have more of an aptitude for spiritual things than for physical. I didn't want to tell you but . . . well, I guess that Rebbe of yours really knows what he's talking about.”

Indeed he did. Rabbi Meir Bastomski became a well-known Torah educator, who had a significant influence on hundreds and hundreds of young students, and is still going strong as he approaches his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. And as for his father, against the projections of all the doctors he lived another twenty years, which they admitted was an open miracle, and rejoiced with many grandchildren and great- grandchildren until the age of eighty-two.

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**Rabbi Meir Bastomski** served as the principal of the vocational school in Kfar Chabad for twenty-three years, and spent almost twenty years as principal and then general director of the Tzemach Tzedek Talmud Torah in Petach Tikva, for several hundred children, mostly from non-observant backgrounds. (To hear him tell his story in a video interview, go to [www.chabad.org/3908664](http://www.chabad.org/3908664).)

*Sources:* Compiled and adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the rendition of **Rabbi Tuvia Bolton**, which he heard directly from R. Bastomski, as recorded in an email from “The Avner Institute” <Rebbebook @ gmail.com>, with factual corrections from “JEM – Here’s My Story.”

*Connection:* Weekly Reading (Levit 19:27 – Not to shave off your beard)

*Biographical note:* **Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe** מנחם: [11 Nissan 5662 - 3 Tammuz 5754 (April 1902 – June 1994 C.E.)], became the seventh Rebbe of the Chabad dynasty after his father-in-law’s passing on 10 Shvat 5710 (1950 C.E.). He is widely acknowledged as the greatest Jewish leader of the second half of the 20th century. Although a dominant scholar in both the revealed and hidden aspects of Torah and fluent in many languages and scientific subjects, the Rebbe is best known for his extraordinary love and concern for every Jew on the planet. His emissaries around the globe dedicated to strengthening Judaism number in the thousands. Hundreds of volumes of his teachings have been printed, as well as dozens of English renditions.

