

**bs"D From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles**

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## ***Even in Bangladesh***

Mr. Max Cohen from Manchester received a call from a business associate in Bangladesh. "Mr. Cohen, we've prepared a large shipment of merchandise for you. We are eagerly awaiting your arrival, so we can close the deal."

Mr. Cohen was equally keen on the deal. For years, he had benefited from his association with the textile industry in that country. And yet he had mixed feelings.

He was familiar with the country, rife with civil uprisings and natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods and earthquakes.

Only a year earlier, he had fled the country without concluding his business, after violent fighting had broken out in the streets. Some months later, enroute from Hong Kong, he canceled a stopover in Bangladesh because a full-force cyclone had ripped through the country.

On April 21, 1991, one month before the flight he had reserved, the 9:00 PM news had reported that another cyclone had hit Bangladesh [which left 138,000 dead and 10 million homeless]. That, and the fact that by 10:00 PM he had not received an answer from the Rebbe, were enough to cause Mr. Cohen to seriously consider canceling his flight.

He spoke several times to his associates there. They tried repeatedly to calm his fears. "Things are quiet now, Max," they reassured him. "The worst of the cyclone is over and the streets here in Chittagong are calm. There is nothing to worry about."

Mr. Cohen still was not convinced. After considerable deliberation, he proceeded with the arrangements for the trip, but faxed the details of his plans to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of righteous memory, asking his advice and blessing.

His flight was scheduled for the following Sunday. Throughout the entire week Mr. Cohen remained in contact with the Rebbe's office in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, inquiring whether or not he had received a reply, but to no avail. Sunday morning, Mr. Cohen called the Rebbe's secretary at his home. "Is there anything you can do for me? I need an answer urgently."

"It's difficult to ask the Rebbe such matters on Sunday, because he devotes many hours to distributing dollars," the secretary said. (Beginning in 1986, the Rebbe would conduct a weekly "receiving line"; every visitor received a dollar to give to charity.)

In the evening Mr. Cohen drove to the airport. There was still time before the 10:30 PM departure. "If an answer from the Rebbe comes, I'll be ready to go," he thought as he checked in.

While other passengers relaxed in the departure lobby, Mr. Cohen nervously called Lubavitch headquarters several times. Friends in Crown Heights also tried to verify if there was an answer for him. In his dilemma, he called his brother-in-law, David Jaffe, for advice. After he hung up the phone, David had an idea. He hurried over to the dollar line and asked the Rebbe for a reply for his brother-in-law.

As his baggage was being removed from the plane, he placed a final call to his father-in-law, Abraham Jaffe, in Manchester. "I'll have to stay overnight in London," he said. "I'll return to Manchester tomorrow." As they conversed, Mr. Cohen began to unwind and relax from the tense hours he had gone through. The men continued talking casually for a while, when Mr. Jaffe heard a beep on his line. "Excuse me, Max, I have another call. I'll put you on hold for just a moment."

On the other line was his son David from Crown Heights. "I have news for Max," he said excitedly, "but I don't know how to reach him." With a press on the button, the elder Mr. Jaffe connected Max with a conference call. The two men listened in anticipation as David related his story.

"When I reached the Rebbe, it was 5:00 PM, and already 10:00 PM in London. I described Max's situation to the Rebbe, explaining that he was at the airport waiting for the Rebbe's blessing. 'It's tumultuous there,' the Rebbe said. I ventured to tell the Rebbe that things had become calmer. The Rebbe then handed me a dollar for Max, and gave him his blessing for a successful journey.

"I turned to go, but the Rebbe's attendant called me back. The Rebbe gave me another dollar and said: 'This is for the *shaliach* (emissary) in Bangladesh.'

"I stood transfixed in amazement. 'Jews in Bangladesh?' I wondered. 'And a Lubavitch *shaliach* at that?'

"The Rebbe surely noticed my astonishment, for he added: 'There is a Jew in that country who is involved with Lubavitch. I shall forward the dollars by special delivery to Max's hotel in Bangladesh. I won't keep you another moment.'"

There was no time to lose. Laden with his suitcases that had already been deplaned, and the Rebbe's blessing, Mr. Cohen boarded in the nick of time.

The long flight gave him ample time to recollect his thoughts and muse at the unbelievable chain of events. If David hadn't had that idea; if I hadn't called my father-in-law; if we hadn't prolonged our conversation; if David's call would have come a minute later . . . what divine providence!

But what was mostly on his mind was the mysterious mission from the Rebbe to deliver a dollar to “a Jew who is involved in Lubavitch activity.” He had traveled to Bangladesh many times. His business associates were all Muslims, and so was almost everyone else he had ever met there. A Jew in Bangladesh? A Lubavitch activist? Even if so how was he supposed to locate him in a population of 114 million...?

Upon arriving in the city of Chittagong in eastern Bangladesh, Mr. Cohen checked into Hotel Agribad and set out to find the person for whom the Rebbe had sent the dollar.

After two days of searching, Mr. Cohen returned to his hotel weary and frustrated. Just then he noticed a man hurrying towards the elevator before its doors closed. There was something striking in the man’s face. A thought flashed through his mind. He retraced his steps towards the elevator.

“Excuse me, sir, are you Jewish?”

The man turned around and stared at Mr. Cohen. The elevator doors closed, but the man remained standing there.

“Yes,” he replied emphatically.

Minutes later, the two men were deep in conversation in Mr. Cohen’s hotel room. Two Jews, two worlds of business, personal concerns, and interesting experiences came together in a meeting of chance in distant Bangladesh.

Or was it chance? As they conversed, Mr. Cohen sensed that this indeed was the man he was looking for.

“The Lubavitcher Rebbe asked me to deliver a dollar to a Jew who is involved in Lubavitch activity in Bangladesh.”

The man, who had introduced himself as Walter from North Carolina, was visibly moved. “Yes, I know the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and from time to time I am involved in Lubavitch activities,” he said slowly. “I suppose this is the Rebbe’s way of expressing his concern and encouragement to a simple Jew halfway around the globe.”

And Walter began to tell his story:

“My import-export business takes me to many places throughout the world, but I have spent most of my recent years in Bangladesh. Come what may, however, I always go back to North Carolina at least twice a year, for Passover and for the High Holidays.

“Before my business brought me to Bangladesh, I was an active member of the Jewish community in Charlotte, North Carolina. We have a large community with many members, but like other communities in the States, many do not observe mitzvot. Intermarriage is on the rise, and our youth lack direction. So I

wholeheartedly welcomed the young Lubavitch couple who arrived in North Carolina in 1980, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak and Mrs. Mariasha Groner.

“I did my best to help them acclimate themselves into our community and get started with their work. I maintain a close, steady relationship with them, even though seven years have passed since I moved here. Also, my wife and I travel back twice a year for the holidays.

“While phoning Rabbi Groner some years ago, I discussed an issue which had been on my mind. Over the years, I had met a number of Jewish families who spend extended periods of time here in Bangladesh on business. They and their children had very little, if any, connection with Jewish values and observance. Rabbi Groner helped me organize a Jewish education program for the children. Since then, he has been sending me educational material from North Carolina.

“Once, about three years ago, Rabbi Groner mentioned that he had included a report of my Bangladesh activities in his periodic reports of his own activities to the Rebbe.”

Walter continued slowly, and his next words were emotionally charged: “Don’t ask me too many questions about our providential meeting here. I honestly have no rational answer.

“I, and all the families with whom I am involved, live in Dhaka, the capital. My business affairs have always been located in the same area. I never traveled to other parts of this country until this Monday morning, when I felt a sudden urge to see some of the tourist attractions in this area. This is how I happened to be here in Chittagong. I plan to return to Dhaka tomorrow morning.

“It seems that the Rebbe saw fit to encourage me, a distant Jew whom he heard about three years ago!”

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Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from “*To Know and to Care*” vol. 1. ( You can hear Max Cohen tell the story, with a video clip of his dialogue with the Rebbe, on [Chabad.org](http://Chabad.org). In fact, a number of details there differ from the above story, and presumably are more accurate. I added a few at the last moment.)

Connections: 1) **Passover Seder** will take place on this Friday evening - *Shabbat*.  
2) Tuesday is the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of **the Lubavitcher Rebbe**’s birth.

*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.