

From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles <editor@ascentofsafed.com>
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The Principal, The Spy, and The Rebbe

Rabbi Shlomo Giladi, former director of the Vocational School of Kfar Chabad, relates:

It was 1978, right after the Camp David Accord. I was sitting in my office, working on some papers, when I was told I had a visitor.

A man I had never seen before walked in and took a seat. "My name is Yair," he said, and presented himself as an employee in the office of the prime minister. He took out some ID as proof.

He removed a file from his briefcase and placed it on my desk. "Please read it," he said quietly.

I opened the file and leafed through it. To my shock, it was filled with biographical information about me. Every detail of my personal life was included and arranged in correct chronological order: when I emigrated from Yemen, every address I ever lived at, when I was drafted, where I had fought during the Six Day War, every job I ever worked at. Clearly, a great deal of time and effort had gone into compiling all this.

Then it dawned on me: this was not just an "employee in the office of the prime minister," but a member of the *Mossad*,¹ which technically lay under the prime minister's jurisdiction.

I closed the file and looked at him expectantly. "What do you want from me?"

The man remained silent for a minute as if composing his words. Then he asked me a question. "Is it true you're going to **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** in two weeks?"

I told him yes, still guessing at where the conversation was leading.

"That is the reason I have come to you," my visitor declared. "I am here in the name of Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Surely you know that a large Jewish community still exists in Yemen. Over the years, the State of Israel has been trying to reestablish contact, but unsuccessfully. The Yemenite government has blocked all attempts at getting through."

The man leaned forward intently. "We thought that because of the isolation of that community, it would be a good idea if a handful of students were allowed to leave Yemen to study Judaism in another country. When they return home they can serve as rabbis and teachers."

¹ The covert intelligence and special operations agency of Israel abroad, whose director is required to answer only and directly to the prime minister.

The problem, the man continued, was the lack of formal ties between Israel and Yemen. “We came to the conclusion,” he said, “that for the plan to work, it must be initially proposed by a Jewish spiritual leader from the U.S. And the most suitable one for the job is the Lubavitcher Rebbe.”

He announced, “I am, therefore, asking you to convey our request to him.”

I stared at the man in bewilderment. Chassidim had long whispered about a possible relationship between the Rebbe and the Mossad. Nothing could stop them from simply picking up a phone. The whole thing seemed fishy.

“All right, how do I come into all of this?” I said. Why would the Mossad need me as an intermediary? Surely there are more direct ways of asking the Rebbe.”

“We already tried,” answered the man, calmly. “Several times.” He revealed names of higher-ups who had approached the Rebbe – Yisrael Yeshayahu, Speaker of the Knesset (who like me was of Yemenite origin); Henry Kissinger, U.S. Secretary of State.

My mysterious visitor left room for doubt whether he was referring to getting the boys out of Yemen or establishing contact with the Rebbe. So I continued to protest. “But what’s all this got to do with me? Do you really think I have some kind of influence over the Rebbe? If these men couldn’t do it, why do you think I could?”

“We have reason to believe that the Rebbe would agree if it came through you,” the man replied, unfazed.

He wouldn’t tell me where they had gotten that idea. “Look,” he added, “you’ll be speaking to the Rebbe anyway. All we’re asking for is five minutes of your time.”

I kept trying to explain that the whole idea was off-base. The Mossad must have mistaken me for someone else. But the man wouldn’t let go. The meeting ended without my giving him a clear commitment.

But that was only the first visit. Yair returned several times to pick up where he had left off. Once he even came to my house. He never revealed too much information, but kept hinting that there was more than met the eye. In the end, I agreed.

* * *

Two weeks later, I flew to New York. Nevertheless, I remained somewhat unconvinced. Saturday night, the night before my *yechidus* (personal private audience with the Rebbe), I finally decided to mention it in a very general way to the Rebbe’s secretary, Rabbi Chaim-Mordechai Hodakov, and ask for advice.

Talking to him, I avoided too much detail. I merely said that I had been approached by the Mossad to deliver a message to the Rebbe. Rabbi Hodakov listened carefully, and his answer was quite interesting. “I’m sure they know how to contact the Rebbe without you. Why did they choose you to act as liaison?”

“I asked them the same thing, but I never got a satisfactory answer.”

In the end, he didn't tell me yes or no. A few minutes before the yechidus, I decided to mention it briefly at the end of my *pahn*, my written request to the Rebbe. At the very worst, the Rebbe would answer the same way as Rabbi Hodakov and tell me that the Mossad would know of a more direct way of contact.

Interestingly, that Shabbat there had been a *farbrengen* (Chasidic gathering) during which the Rebbe had vehemently spoken out against the Camp David Accord. How ironic: I could picture the people in the prime minister's office patting themselves on the backs for attaining "peace," thinking the Rebbe was their big supporter. And here, the Rebbe had not only rejected the Camp David Accord outright, but strongly condemned it. I was certain the Rebbe would turn them down.

I entered the Rebbe's office holding two sheets of paper. The first contained all my personal concerns. The second, which I presented to the Rebbe only after he had finished discussing the contents of the first, referred to the situation in Yemen.

This was the first time I had ever broached a communal matter with the Rebbe. And it was strange: as soon as the Rebbe read the note, his manner changed completely. He relaxed into his chair and gave me an encouraging smile.

"This person that you spoke with," he said. "Is he reliable? Can you trust him?"

I told the Rebbe that the man claimed to be a senior agent in the Mossad, head of the department that dealt with Jewish communities in Arab lands. From the Rebbe's reaction I could see that he knew whom I was referring to, and that this gentleman was indeed reliable.

He then asked, "Are you able to contact them from here, without phoning or writing a letter?"

I didn't know what the Rebbe meant. Without a phone or a letter, the only way to contact them would be if they contacted me first. I waited for the Rebbe to continue, as he obviously wanted to verify a few more facts.

"I want to know two things," the Rebbe began. "First, would the Israeli government allow the Yemenite boys to study in an American yeshiva before going to *Eretz Yisroel* (Land of Israel)? And second, would the government willingly exempt them from serving in the IDF?"

My hunch had been right all along: the situation was a lot more complicated than Yair had let on. "As far as I know," I answered, "the Mossad doesn't seem to care if the students ever went to Eretz Yisroel after studying here."

The Rebbe appeared pleased. Then, to my surprise, he said, "They've already contacted me about it."

The Rebbe then mentioned Knesset speaker Yeshayahu and Secretary of State Kissinger. "There was nothing to talk about when they approached me, so I turned them down," he explained. "At the time, the climate in the Arab world was not conducive to such matters. Now, however, the situation has changed and become more open. At least there is a chance of success."

I understood that the Rebbe was referring to the peace treaty, which had presumably taken the edge off Arab hostility. In the current climate, it was not unfeasible to approach the Yemenite government with the request.

“It is obvious,” the Rebbe continued, “that I will do whatever I can to help. You know that I operate in all kinds of remote places, even if only two or three Jews live there. How much more so when a community of many thousands is at stake! Without a doubt, I will do whatever I can.”

I told the Rebbe that, to my understanding, the Mossad wanted him to speak directly to the Imam, the chief religious figure in Yemen. The Rebbe answered in approximately these words, “I will do whatever I am able. My honor isn’t important.”

The Rebbe knew that the Israelis’ interests tended to lean toward the secular. Nevertheless, if there was even the slightest chance of a spiritual benefit, he would do whatever was necessary.

The Rebbe reiterated his willingness to become involved. “Even if I need the American president’s help, I’ll find a way to get it,” he insisted.

At the end of the yechidus, the Rebbe asked me to keep him posted. “The next time they contact you, I want to know all the details. But remember,” he cautioned, “do not use the telephone or commit anything to writing.”

The Rebbe was certain I’d find some other method of communication. He then asked me several more questions about the Mossad agent who had contacted me and his relationship with the Prime Minister.

At the time, Yeshayahu was in the hospital at Holon. I was surprised when the Rebbe suddenly changed the subject and asked if I had visited him before coming to New York. The thought had never occurred to me, an average citizen. Nevertheless, the Rebbe insisted that I go and convey my personal greetings.

Now it was the Rebbe’s turn to be surprised. “But you knew he was sick and in the hospital. How could you not have gone to visit him?”

* * *

Of course, that was the first thing I did when I returned to Israel. When I approached the Knesset speaker at the Wolfson Hospital, I told him that the Lubavitcher Rebbe had sent me to see him and had even chastised me for not coming before.

Yeshayahu laughed. “The Lubavitcher Rebbe has nothing else to do?”

I took advantage of the opportunity to mention the idea of getting some students out of Yemen to learn in yeshiva. Awhile later, on my second visit, I added more details, telling him that the Rebbe had given his approval.

“I’m surprised,” Yeshayahu exclaimed. “As far as I knew, the Rebbe wasn’t interested.”

Personally, I was very happy at the Rebbe's positive answer, which was exactly what the Mossad had wanted to hear. Until today I'll never know why they chose me, or why they thought that I, of all people, could change the Rebbe's mind. But by Divine Providence, I was in the right place at the right time.

I called Yair with an answer for him. He hurried over to my house, and I repeated the entire exchange with the Rebbe. He was surprised but happy at the Rebbe's response, and promised to pass on the information.

Several days later he returned and told me he had discussed the matter with the prime minister. "Mr. Begin thanks you very much," he said. He even gave me the prime minister's home phone number should I ever need to contact him.

Without getting into too much detail, I can tell you that the Mossad was very appreciative of the Rebbe's involvement. They ended up consulting with the Rebbe quite often, even though their goals were not exactly the same.

When I mentioned to Yair that the Rebbe had cautioned me against using the phone or writing letters, he gave me a mysterious smile and said simply, "The Rebbe is a very wise man."

He then asked if I was willing to make several more trips to the Rebbe. But being that I was too busy with a steady job, I gave him instead the name of a Yemenite friend living in the U.S. who I knew would be willing and able to act as a liaison.

I really don't know what went on behind the scenes. Whatever negotiations were made continued for a good two or three years. Then I heard that a group of five Yemenites had been allowed to travel to the U.S. to study Judaism so they could return to Yemen and serve as religious leaders. It was not widely covered by the media – only a few lines in the newspaper. But I was relieved when I saw that the endeavor had been successful.

When those five students left, it was the first contact between the Jewish world and the Jews of Yemen in decades. And thank G-d, the lines of communication have grown and continued ever since.

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Source: Excerpted and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from an emailing of the Avner Institute (Rebbebook@ gmail.com) on May 3, 2022, which is based on the translation of an interview with Rabbi Giladi by R. Menachem Zigelbaum.

*Connection* - Weekly Torah (this week in Israel; next week in Diaspora):  
The Reading, *Shelach*, is primarily concerned with the episode of the Twelve Spies.

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe** מ"נ: [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.