AN INCORRIGIBLE RESEARCHER DISCOVERS CHASSIDUS

*At a young age he had a small science lab in his house, he star-gazed, and contemplated the meaning of nature, but it was only when he heard about the ten s’firos that he understood that he needed to find meaning in his life. This he found at the Chabad House in Kiryat Bialik. \* Over the years, he began researching fears and phobias and he now treats them. \* R’ Ofer Gottlieb tells his life story and shares fascinating insights.*

By Nosson Avrohom
Photos by Arele Crombie

Since he was a boy, Ofer Gottlieb took an interest in biology and the sciences. His curiosity and inquisitive nature were never satisfied. He always wanted to understand and know the depth within nature and how living creatures behave. He did not have to go far to satisfy his curiosity since the home he grew up in, in Kiryat Bialik, breathed science. His father was a research agronomist and young Ofer mimicked his work. The rewards for good behavior at home were small biology labs and science books. Ofer used his free time for biological experiments.

Those who knew him at the time, family and friends, were sure he would end up in a career in science. But Hashem had other plans.

A PRESENT OF A SCIENCE LAB

There was no traditional observance in his parents’ home.

“I attended ORT Bialik, one of the best schools in the Haifa-Krayot area, and signed up for the biology track, obviously. Ever since I can remember, I would observe my father, an arborist by profession, doing tests on leaf aphids and tree pathogens in the home labs that we had, and it fired my imagination. The possibility of examining tiny things that the human eye alone cannot see, which determine the health of the tree, thrilled me.”

The child followed in his father’s footsteps and got his own small chemical and physics lab with which he began to study the behavior of ants and other creeping things.

“I raised ants at home and followed their life cycle and way of life. It was fascinating. Nature interested me. I quickly realized that the world could not run on its own and there was Someone who made sure that every living thing would fit into nature harmoniously. I arrived at this conclusion after closely examining nature. Every one of the powers of nature has its characteristics and they all fit together in our world.”

At a young age, he was registered in the “Immigrant’s Camps” youth movement. “It’s a very leftist, socialist movement,” says Ofer. “I was in a very tight group of boys my age. One of the counselors who loved astronomy got us all interested in it and we went on trips together to view the stars. I bought a telescope with which I could watch the movements of the stars. Throughout my youth it was my favorite hobby. By looking at the stars I was exposed to a world beyond what ordinary people see and understand.”

ENCOUNTERING THE TEN S’FIROS

All these interests did not stop Ofer from doing well in school. He was even put up as a candidate by the school for an advanced study project at the Technion in Haifa. One of his good school friends was Ronen Bergman, later to become a famous military reporter. Together they were the lead players in chess competitions in the north.

The change in his life began when he was in twelfth grade. His mother began taking an interest in Judaism, at first through kabbalah classes and then through the shiurim of Rabbi Yitzchok Ginsburgh, who would come every week and give classes in Haifa.

“My mother was the first to tell me about the ten s’firos and other concepts in Chassidus. This was in 5748. I understood that just as in every subject I had researched up till then, there was an entire world behind it, the same is true for creation; there is Someone who created it and directs it. The first shiur I attended was given by Professor Yirmiyahu Branover who came to lecture at the Chabad House. I joined my mother in attending it. That class ignited the spark that later turned into a flaming fire.

“I then regularly attended the shiurim at the Chabad House in Kiryat Bialik. I mainly heard shiurim from Rabbi Shmuel Frumer who was *mekarev* me to Judaism. The subjects learned there spoke to me and made an impact on me. I remember that at first R’ Frumer taught the *kuntres* “U’Maayan MiBeis Hashem,” and later we began learning Tanya. I was amazed by what we learned. The things we learned had a sweetness and refinement, as opposed to everything I had learned and was familiar with from before.

“I still made no real changes and it was only when I went for classes at the Chabad House that I would wear a kippa. I took it off when I left. Several months later I decided to put on t’fillin every day, which I did before going to school. I kept my journey a secret and told no one, in fear of their reaction.

“We were sent by the youth movement for two weeks of field work to the kibbutz Elrom in the Golan Heights. At that point I was already putting on t’fillin every morning, but I still did not want anyone to know about it. In the morning we would get up and go to work in the apple orchard. So that nobody would discover my secret, I would wake up a half an hour earlier, at the first light of day, put on t’fillin, and take them off before anyone else awoke.”

Ofer then decided to reveal his secret after preparing himself for negative reactions from his friends.

“I will never forget that experience. It was a Tuesday night, after another fascinating class at the Chabad House. I decided not to take my kippa off. I invited all my friends to our house and sat there wearing a kippa. It took them some time to understand what I wanted from them. When they noticed the kippa they began shooting questions at me. They cried over my ‘poor choice,’ but I was confident and told them they were mistaken.”

A CHASSID CREATES AN ATMOSPHERE

When he graduated high school, R’ Frumer suggested that he go to yeshiva, but Ofer did not feel ready for that and he enlisted in the IDF Communication Corps. During his three years in the army, he was stationed in the western sector of Southern Lebanon. He and his friends provided communications for soldiers from the paratrooper and Golani units, who went on ambushes and various operations against Hezbollah terrorists.

“Although we were not categorized as combat troops and weren’t trained for that, we went together with the fighters to the most forsaken and dangerous spots, and saw things that even years later we are not allowed to talk about.”

Their main work was done at night. During the day the soldiers rested or spent time on social activities. For Ofer this was a good opportunity to spread the wellsprings and serve as a shliach.

“I would start the day by putting t’fillin on with many soldiers, and was able to start shiurim in Chassidus. This was in addition to numerous conversations about faith. Many soldiers were drawn to Torah as a result. There were a lot of soldiers from northern Tel Aviv serving with me and at the beginning they told me that they were certain I would drop my religion during my time in the army. What actually happened was that many of them became baalei teshuva by the end of their service.

“I had a peer in the army who came from a Sefardic family. He viewed Judaism favorably, but he wasn’t observant. We spoke a lot about the significance of Judaism in daily life and as a result he began putting on t’fillin and eventually became a baal teshuva. I remember that one time when we visited an outpost of the South Lebanese Army (a pro-Israel Christian militia), and he saw one of the soldiers loudly praying to his G-d, my friend immediately took out his t’fillin, put them on, and began loudly proclaiming the Shma.”

THE REBBE GAVE ME A SHARP LOOK

“When I finished my army service I wanted to study bio-technology, which was an emerging field in Eretz Yisroel at the time. This was 5753 when the Rebbe answered with a nod or a shake of his head. I sent a letter and a few days later the secretary called me and said he had a bracha for me for my studies. The classes took place at a branch of the Technion in Karmiel. I would go there every day in a hat and jacket and I did mivtza t’fillin there too and started shiurim in Chassidus.”

One time, he decided to put on a video of the Rebbe encouraging the singing of Yechi, in the campus student lounge.

“I was with another three students in the lounge area and I was sure that in another few minutes, some more guys would show up and request that the video be turned off in favor of TV and a soccer or basketball channel. We were watching and watching and I was spellbound. It was only when the videotape concluded that I noticed to my shock that there were dozens of students standing and watching the Rebbe video, glued to the screen.”

It was for the holidays of Tishrei that Ofer flew to New York to be with the Rebbe for the first time. “When I merited to walk through the doors of 770, I burst into tears over the great privilege that had come my way.”

He has a very personal recollection from that Tishrei, which is engraved in his memory. On that occasion, R’ Ofer was standing on one of the pyramids on the side of the porch. “Suddenly, a few bachurim came who wanted to remove me from their usual spot, but meanwhile the curtain opened and the Rebbe came out. Everyone started to sing ‘Yechi Adoneinu.’ Since we were standing on the side, I could not fully see the Rebbe’s face from that angle. I stood transfixed in my place, and in my thoughts I asked the Rebbe, being that this is my first time coming to him, and I had not yet seen his face, please if possible to look towards me. As soon as I finished formulating my request, the Rebbe turned his head sharply in my direction and gave me a penetrating look. I could see the Rebbe’s eyes clearly. That look from the Rebbe will never leave me...”

The visit to 770 was the “final blow” in his becoming a full-fledged Chabad Chassid.

After he married, he and his wife settled in Kiryat Shmuel, and he spent a year learning in the Kollel Nefesh Chaya of R’ Yigal Pizem, from whom he learned a great deal. Following the period spent learning in kollel, he was called to serve as a science teacher in the Chabad school run by R’ Pizem, and the next year he was appointed as a Jewish studies teacher.

THE ANSWER TO FEARS

During his twenty years in education, R’ Ofer Gottlieb was exposed to no small number of students who struggled with fears. “You see a child or even an adult, who limits himself due to fear-based struggles that he carries around inside, or is prone to fits of uncontrollable rage. Over a long period of time, I searched for answers to these difficulties, until I came across an amazing book by Anthony Robbins entitled ‘Unlimited Power.’

“He wrote the book on what is known today as NLP. That approach, as opposed to other psychology based therapeutic models which drag on for long periods of time, has proven itself very effective and is able to produce results in a short time. The underlying idea of the book is that the mind is the director that guides all of a person’s experiences. Just as a director who directs a film chooses different effects and lighting in order to inspire fear in the viewer, or in the reverse, to generate an upbeat feeling, the mind does the same thing.

“A person’s feelings operate according to the experiences and images that the brain takes in and reconstructs. If we want to change our feeling of fear and dread, we need to alter the negative experience that we absorbed in the mind and is causing these feelings. One cannot really cancel out what the mind has absorbed, but we can change the direction of our thoughts. A simple analogy would be of someone on a sailboat in the open sea. If a storm wind suddenly begins to blow, it is impossible to get rid of it, but it is possible to change the direction of the sails. This approach blew me away and I saw that it really works.”

R’ Ofer decided to formally study the workings of this approach in depth, first in Eretz Yisroel and then at the NLP Academy in England.

**It is my understanding that you deal mainly with fears. What is the treatment approach?**

I see a broad spectrum of patients, some with extreme phobias and some that could be classified as light cases. That is why there is also a broad range of therapeutic approaches. To provide an example, there is something called “adding new aspects to a previous experience.” I will ask the person to imagine himself sitting in the middle of a large auditorium and watching a movie of himself. First I will ask him to see it in black and white, then I will ask him to see it running backwards in the actual colors as the experience, and I play circus music in the background.

What happens to the brain during those moments is that it is completely thrown. It is used to reacting to that experience with fear, but the happy music is sending confusing messages. What I am actually doing is changing the brain’s response to the experience in question. This is something that I might repeat many times until the person reports a sharp decline in the intensity of the fear. Recently I had someone with a phobia of riding in elevators due to an early childhood experience. I used this approach and the phobia disappeared completely.

**People tend to think of fears as very difficult to overcome.**

I will share a recent story, with some details changed. A boy came to me who had a bad case of the terrors. He had been exposed to a film that had some terrifying scenes, and as a result he could not sleep at night. When he would finally fall asleep, he would get up shortly after in a panic, shouting from fright. The scenes that he saw would be right in front of his eyes.I chose an approach that creates a linkage between the scary image and a fun laughing voice from the world of the child. It was amazing to see how the cause of the fears disappeared along with the fears.

This is an approach that works mainly with fears that I would classify as of medium severity. He stopped imagining the image that he saw as something scary, by changing the voice and the appearance in his mind, and the fear faded.

THE POWER OF FAITH

As the years passed, R’ Ofer’s inquisitiveness continued to work overtime. He familiarized himself with more and more approaches to diagnosis and therapy, and now he no longer works exclusively with NLP. He also works today with another approach, “The Work of Byron Katie.” The basis of her “work” is the insight that all of the suffering that we experience in life is a result of the fact that we believe our thoughts and feelings and identify with them. “The Work” provides a simple and relatively quick tool to free the person from the grip of thoughts and stop the pain.

**Does the fact that you are a Chassid and learn Chassidus help you in your work?**

I think that the fact that we believe that everything comes from Hashem and is by divine providence, helps us contend with and overcome challenges. We know consciously that we cannot control everything; there is a Conductor who orchestrates all things.

There is a sicha of the Rebbe about the attribute of bitachon, full reliance on Hashem. It says in the verse that when Moshe realized that he was seen burying the Egyptian in the sand, he said “Indeed, the matter has become known.” The Rebbe explains in the sicha that the fact that Pharaoh heard about it was a direct result of the fact that Moshe expressed his concern, and if not for that concern, Pharaoh would have never found out. If Moshe would have had full bitachon in Hashem, then everything would have worked out fine and it would never have become known to Pharaoh. The more we believe that it is good, the more we cause it to actually play out that way.

R’ Ofer Gottlieb has no intentions of resting on his laurels. He is currently working on another book, which draws connections between the most effective and short-term treatments to concepts in Chassidus, for the purpose of making them accessible to the broader public.

R’ Ofer Gottlieb and his family have merited over the years to see many miracles through the Igros Kodesh, but the most moving miracle for them involved the birth of their third child, Yechiel Yaakov:

We had two daughters, and then my wife’s father passed away. Her father’s name was Yechiel and my wife prayed for a son to be named after him. A few months passed, and we found out that my wife was expecting. It was two years after Gimmel Tammuz, and we informed the Rebbe by way of the Igros Kodesh.

In the answer that we opened to, there was a clear blessing for a son. I will never forget the sight of the three words (in Hebrew) that jumped out at me, “a father bequeaths his son.” I told my wife that I was confident that we would have a boy. After a few weeks, events led to the need for my wife to undergo an exam, where the doctors informed us to our shock that my wife was carrying a girl. This was a blow to our faith in the answer of the Rebbe. We decided to write again and ask for a bracha from the Rebbe. Once again, the answer was clear, the entire letter dealt with explaining the term “our sons will be our guarantors.” I told my wife that I was ever more confident that we would in fact have a son.

As per the Rebbe’s blessing – and in contradiction to the opinions of two doctors – a son was born...

This was just one link in a whole series of clear divine providence. When we wrote to the Rebbe about giving a name, we opened to two letters that included in the date “Parshas VaYechi Yaakov.” We had already decided to give the two names Yechiel (VaYechi) and Yaakov...

What is no less amazing is that he was born in the week of Parshas VaYechi!

IT ALL DEPENDS ON OUR PERSPECTIVE

The first book published by R’ Ofer Gottlieb is called *Achdus HaB’ria* (The Unity of Creation):

I see it as a life’s work. I gathered the material over several years until I had enough material to put it all together in book form. The goal of the book is to show that there is no conflict between the world of science and our holy Torah, and even more so, how all of the most astounding discoveries of science in the modern area can already be found in the teachings of Chassidus. The book is broken down into chapters and it references discoveries in science, astronomy and biology.

**Can you provide an example of the connection between science and Chassidus?**

I will give you an example that relates to the future Redemption. There is an entire area of science known as Quantum Theory. One of the main principles of this theory is that the human observer influences and even determines reality. This is a tremendous revolution in the world of science. For many years there was a major debate as to the nature of light. There was one theory that posited that it is a series of particles and the opposing view was that it is a wave. Over the years, evidence was gathered that supported each of these positions.

What cut short the debate was the development of the Quantum Theory in the early part of the twentieth century, which concluded that both are correct. Sometimes light manifests as a wave and sometimes as particles. It all depends on the observer, whose perspective is the determining factor.

This clearly proven research rocked the scientific world. In the past, the thinking was that there is the researcher and the subject of his research with no connection between the two, much like an observer at a soccer game has no power to influence the outcome. But in fact, we have discovered that the view of the observer can affect a change in the outcome. What is amazing is that this idea can be found in Judaism from way back in time. For example, the “sanctification of the new moon,” which requires the testimony of people who saw the new moon. Seemingly, it would be possible to develop clear rules to determine the exact time, which is what we rely on today, and yet we see that the Torah insisted that it be established based on actually being seen by real people.

Similarly, in the laws of *tzaraas* (often translated as leprosy, though it was not a natural phenomenon). A person could clearly be a *metzora*, but when was he declared impure? Only if the Kohen looked at it and declared it as such. There are countless examples of this.

In this period immediately leading up to the Redemption, one of the main things that the Rebbe requests and demands of us is to open our eyes. A Jew can change the reality based on his observation. It is all in the eyes of the beholder. It is an amazing idea that a person can determine how the reality of the world will appear.