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The Jewish Cultbuster

A *Zman* Exclusive Interview with
Renowned *Kiruv* Activist Rabbi Shea Hecht

Few other Jewish-American activists have had as stormy a career as Rabbi Shea Hecht. His confrontations with missionary groups are legendary. Far more frightening and dramatic were his battles with dangerous cults that ensnared Jewish souls, transforming them into veritable zombies that followed their leaders' orders mindlessly. Often his efforts involved arranging commando-like missions to rescue these lost souls from their physical and mental slavery.

Rabbi Hecht risked life and liberty to save Jews. When he granted *Zman* an exclusive interview to share some of the riveting episodes that he personally experienced, we jumped at the opportunity. Fasten your seatbelts and join us for a front-row seat showcasing the work of a Jewish cultbuster.

Mrs. Rosenthal tried to control her feelings as her son Jack entered her car. This was her son, her own flesh and blood, who had so callously told her that she was no longer his mother, since that was what his cult leader said. And this was after draining her of tens of thousands of dollars that went directly to the cult's bank accounts.

Despite all, she never gave up.

At first, Jack remained very cold toward his mother. He only agreed to the meeting after she promised that she would stop trying to convince him to leave the Church of Scientology, and after his supervisors gave him limited permission to meet with her.

The car set out and drove for 20 minutes. Mrs. Rosenthal told her son that she was taking him to a restaurant. But then the car diverted onto a side street, stopping in front of a large, dark warehouse. "What's going on?" Jack asked in alarm.

"I need to step out for a minute," his mother replied calmly as she got out of the car. Suddenly, two large men sat down on either side of Jack. They shoved his head down to the seat and ordered him to remain in that position, "if you know what's good for you."

Jack resisted by kicking and shouting. "This is illegal! Kidnappers! I'll have you all arrested!" he screamed. But the car sped away to a predetermined safe house.

Jack continued shouting and threatening. Finally, one of the two men told him coolly, "You can shout all you like. But for your own sake, I advise you to learn to get along with us."

"Why do I have to get along with you?" Jack challenged in a tone laden with scorn.

"Because you're going to remain here with us for weeks or months, as long as is necessary."

The car arrived at the hiding place. The two tall and heavysset young men grabbed Jack and led him into the house, taking him to a bedroom that contained a bed, a table and several chairs. Jack sat down on the bed with his arms crossed in defiance. His expression clearly told them that their efforts were a waste of time.



Rabbi Hecht recites birchas hachamah from a balloon, Erev Pesach, 2009.

By now it was dark outside, and Rabbi Shea Hecht began cross-examining the young man. He went on for half an hour. Then, suddenly, the building began to shudder and his words were interrupted by the unmistakable sound of an approaching helicopter. The helicopter descended lower and lower until it was hovering directly above the house.

It was a police helicopter. Its bright floodlights illuminated the house from above. Rabbi Hecht and his group were about to be busted themselves. Under his breath, Rabbi Hecht whispered, "Please G-d, help us!"

Launching of Rabbi Hecht's Career

It began one autumn in the early 1970s with a massive campaign across several American states. Ads on billboards, the

radio and in newspapers declared in bold letters: "I Found It!"

For weeks, all people saw wherever they turned was the large slogan proclaiming "I Found It!" The ads offered no explanation what "It" referred to or what the message was trying to promote. People shrugged and ventured guesses at what the campaign was about. One thing was clear, though. Whoever was behind the ad campaign clearly had a lot of money to invest.

Once everyone had seen the ad and had time to mull its meaning, the campaign moved to the next phase. The mask of secrecy was dropped and "It" turned out to be Christianity. Furthermore, the group specifically targeted Jews. Some of the largest and most influential Christian organizations in the world had already invested millions of dollars and were prepared to channel in more funds to achieve their goal.

This ambitious campaign roused considerable concern in the Jewish community. A number of organizations held meetings to address the threat and formulate a response. The conclusion at each of these discussions, though, was largely the same: Not one Jew was going to fall for such a ridiculous slogan as "I Found It!" There was no need to take any action because the threat was nil.

Nevertheless, there was a handful of Jews who came to a very different conclusion. One group—including Rabbi Shea's brother, Reb Shalom Ber Hecht—decided to form a task force to combat the threat and reach out to unaffiliated Jewish students, the first priority of the missionaries. They would do everything in their power to provide these students with lectures and other materials about Judaism, and, even more importantly, give them a taste of authentic Torah learning and living.

It was easier said than done. The group did not have access to the massive pool of funds the missionaries had; they could barely afford the taxi fare! Yet they set about their holy work with rock-solid faith that *Hashem* would help them.

Rabbi Hecht tells us that he was still an unmarried student learning in yeshiva

when, one night, after he came home at the end of the semester, his brother said to him, "How would you like to go down to Columbia University tonight? A missionary group targeting Jews is supposed to speak there."

At first Reb Shea hesitated. What business did he have there? And what could he possibly accomplish? Nevertheless, his brother encouraged him, handing him several anti-missionary pamphlets and the suggestion, "Read this through and you'll get



Zman correspondent Y. Lefkowitz during his interview with Rabbi Hecht in his office at NCFJE.



Rabbi Hecht displays a new book he published on his battle against cults.