

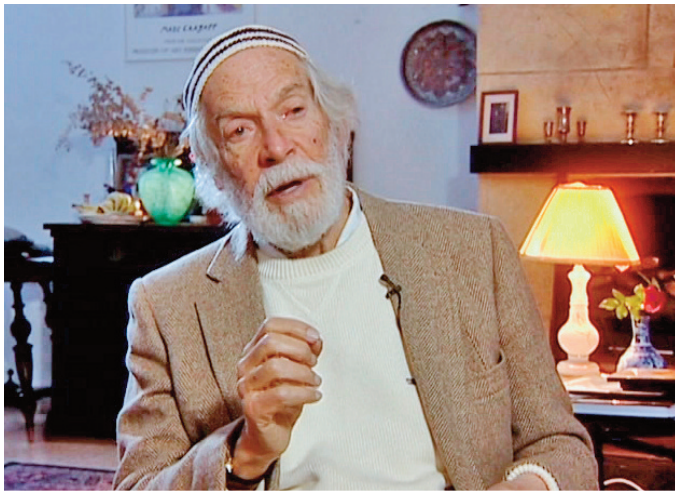
HERE'S my STORY

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"NINE AND A HALF SHOULD BE TEN"

HERBERT WIENER



Meanwhile, I founded a Reform congregation, Temple Israel in South Orange, New Jersey, and I also dabbled in journalism. And this is how I had my first encounter with the Rebbe — in 1955, in the course of writing an article about Chabad Lubavitch for *Commentary* magazine.

The Rebbe granted me an interview, and he was exceedingly kind and attentive in answering my many questions. I was keenly aware that a lot of people were outside waiting for him, so I tried to keep it short, but he said, "No, it's alright, we can continue." And we went on talking for a long time.

I went home profoundly impressed, but I also had more questions. I was eager to meet the Rebbe again, and I did. I also attended Chabad gatherings — the *farbrengens* — at which the Rebbe spoke. Finally, I felt I had enough material to write a responsible article about the Chabad Movement. In fact, I wrote two long articles which *Commentary* published. The public reaction was very gratifying, and even *Time* magazine responded with a positive review.

At that time, Chabad was beginning to branch out, and already had quite a few centers throughout the US and in other countries too. This was in accordance with the Rebbe's directive to "spread the wellsprings" of Chassidism. And I have no question that I was also a means to this end. Indeed, I became a convert to Chabad, in essence, though I remained a Reform rabbi and continued serving my congregation.

The Rebbe treated me as his "emissary in the Reform Movement." He specifically asked that I always stand up for Torah whenever I could and try to add *mitzvahs* to the observance of the Reform Movement wherever I could.

I did that. And during this time — though not because of me — the Reform Movement did become more and more observant. The Rebbe's prognosis of what was coming into being was correct.

The Rebbe also tried to influence me to become
continued on reverse

I grew up in Boston in the 1920s and 1930s, without any Jewish education whatsoever. When it came time for my Bar Mitzvah, a very sweet uncle escorted me to the synagogue one Thursday morning and explained to me how to say a blessing before and after the Torah reading. And then I went home and played handball against the side of the house, as if nothing had happened. That remained the extent of my Jewish education until I went to college.

In college, at the University of Massachusetts, I became active in Hillel, the Jewish organization on campus, and in Avuka, a Zionist organization that ran a camp in the Catskills. As a result, I became interested in Torah observance and in moving to Israel to work the land. However, World War Two intervened. I served in the Merchant Marine, and after it was over, I enrolled in a progressive rabbinical school, the Jewish Institute of Religion, where I was ordained a Reform rabbi and where I became interested in Kabbalah. That interest led me to study with a mystic named Shin Tzaddik Setzer and to the eventual writing of the book, *Nine and a Half Mystics*, which was published in 1969.

MY ENCOUNTER
with the REBBE

An oral history project dedicated to documenting the life of the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory. The story is one of thousands recorded in the over 1,000 videotaped interviews conducted to date. Please share your comments and suggestions. mystory@jemedial.org

continued from reverse

personally more fully Torah observant. When my mother died, he wrote me a letter. He wrote me a brief note of condolence, as he would write to many people who had lost loved ones. And then he wrote a P.S. which was almost two pages long.

In the P.S. he called upon me to be an example within the Reform Movement of what the Jewish tradition asks of us. But he also said, "I'm adding this as a P.S. so that you should know that I don't want to take advantage of your state of grief in order to suggest to you that you live a fuller life of *mitzvahs*. I'm adding it as a P.S., in order to separate it from my condolences to you."

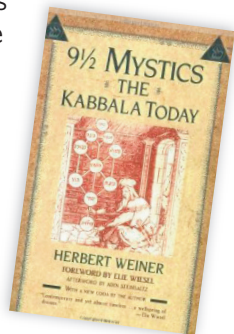
On another occasion, I was discussing with the Rebbe the differences between Chabad and the Reform or Conservative Movements. The Rebbe remarked that, when you ask a question in Jewish law of a Reform or Conservative rabbi, his answer will take into account every possibility — he will tell you that you can go this way, you can go that way, you can do this much, you can do more, you can do less ... and in the end, you will be invited to make your own choice, and you will be told not to feel guilty about making such a choice.

Whereas, when you ask such a question of a Chabad rabbi, his answer will take into account your potential. He may also present you with options. If you cannot fulfill every *mitzvah* at this time, he may give you the option of doing what you can do now, and gradually trying to do more — to eventually fulfill what is asked of you by G-d.

The Rebbe returned to this theme again and again — encouraging me to take whatever steps I could to gradually increase my observance and help others do the same.

I asked the Rebbe what advice he had for people who want to return to Judaism in some way. In his answer, the Rebbe invoked the Prophet Elijah, who told the Jewish people, "Do not try to dance between two opinions. Do not try to dance on two sides of the fence, so to speak. Take a firm stand."

"Even if you can't do it all at once, nevertheless, take a firm stand and say: 'This is the Torah. These are the commandments. This is what I will gradually try to accomplish.' And be whole-hearted about your commitment."



The last time I spoke to the Rebbe, I was in line with many hundreds of others who were receiving blessings from him. When I came up to the Rebbe, the Rebbe said to me, "It's time to go back to your congregation" — I was still leading a Reform congregation then, and he knew it — "now you can announce that you are an Orthodox Jew, and that you always were an Orthodox Jew."

I did that. At the celebration of my retirement from my synagogue, after the usual speeches, I said, "I have something I must tell you. Something I promised the Lubavitcher Rebbe. I wrote about *Nine and a Half Mystics*, and he said, 'I want you to become Ten.' And I want to become Ten; I want to become an Orthodox Jew. In fact, I have always been an Orthodox Jew, but I haven't been practicing it. But now I really want to be an Orthodox Jew, so it will be Ten instead of Nine and a Half."

Herbert Weiner, who passed away in 2013, served for 34 years as the rabbi of Temple Israel of South Orange, NJ. He was interviewed in his home in Jerusalem in May of 2007.

לע"נ ר' ישראל יעקב וזוגתו מרת קריינא ע"ה לאקשין
ע"י בניהם ר' נחמן ור' אברהם ומשפחתם שיחיו

This week in...

- > **5741 — 1980**, during the Shabbos *Farbrengen*, in order to make space for the Rebbe, someone tried to clear a group of children situated near the Rebbe's place. Seeing this, the Rebbe turned to him, saying "These children are part of 'Tzivos Hashem — G-d's Army', while you are merely a citizen. How can you tell them what to do?"
12 Cheshvan
- > **5745 — 1984**, upon entering his car, the Rebbe offered the Israeli photographer Levi Freidin, who was returning to Israel that day, a ride to 770. In the car, they spoke of the film Freidin would produce from his visit to 770 over the month of Tishrei. Upon exiting the car, Freidin told the Rebbe, "We need a healthy Rebbe!" To which the Rebbe replied, "...with healthy *chasidim*."
11 Cheshvan

לע"נ
ר' רפאל משה
בן ר' יעקב מנחם מענדל הכהן

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