

HERE'S my STORY

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SHALOM ALEICHEM

RABBI YONASAN WIENER

Before I relate the story of my meeting with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, I would like to express my gratitude for this opportunity to share it. I've been waiting over 50 years to relate this story, so this goes to show that people should never give up hope, whatever they might be waiting for.

My name is Yonasan Wiener. I was born and bred in Melbourne, Australia, lived for a time in New York, and now I'm living and teaching in Jerusalem.

My family originally came from Poland, a place called Chrzanow, but they bounced around all of Eastern Europe — Krakow, Bremen, Dusseldorf, Frankfurt. In Frankfurt my father attended the *yeshiva* of Rabbi Yosef Breuer, Yeshivat Torah Lehranstalt, and he was there in November 1938 on Kristallnacht, when the Nazis began burning synagogues and Jewish places of business.

After Kristallnacht, my grandfather took his family and fled Germany. They first migrated to Holland and from there to France and then to Australia. My father attended Melbourne High School and Melbourne University, where he excelled because he had a brilliant mind. He got his Ph.D. there and he also studied medicine. In his spare time, my father researched poisons and their antidotes. He studied the red-back spider, a deadly spider in Australia, and he discovered the anti-venom. He also studied the stonefish, a toxic fish which buries itself in beach sand, and when people accidentally step on it, they die. He discovered the anti-venom for stonefish as well. He did this in his spare time, and he didn't want any money for his discoveries.

When he was asked, at the end of his life, what motivated his altruistic research, he said, "Thanks to the Australian government I was saved with my entire family from the Nazis. If I had stayed in Europe I would have perished with my six million brothers and sisters."



In the 1960s, my father won a Fulbright Scholarship to do cancer research at Columbia University in New York. So we packed up and temporarily moved to Flushing, New York, where my father's sister lived. While we were in New York, my father decided to visit the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and he took me and my mother along.

This is where my story begins:

Our appointment was for the 24th of July, 1962, for 10 p.m. My father, being extremely punctual, had us arrive 45 minutes early. We had a long wait because the Mayor of Jerusalem, Mordechai Ish-Shalom, preempted us and, after him, came the Israeli Minister of Religion, Rabbi Borg.

We finally went in at 1 a.m.

I remember the Rebbe's office like it was yesterday. The walls were wood-paneled, and on the Rebbe's table — about the level of my nose — there was a big clock. It was late, and I was watching that clock.

The Rebbe spoke to my father about his cancer research at Columbia. He took a big interest in what my father

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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 1,100 videotaped interviews conducted to date. Please share your comments and suggestions. mystory@jemedial.org

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was doing and, not only that, he knew exactly what my father was talking about. It was like a conversation between two scientists.

The Rebbe also took a keen interest in my mother's activities — she was the president of the Women's Auxiliary in Melbourne and, while in New York, she attended the conference of the Chabad organization for women and girls. The Rebbe wanted to hear firsthand from my mother about what exactly went on at that conference.

After he finished speaking with both my parents, the Rebbe turned to me. And my father nudged me, "Nu, maybe you have something that you would like to ask the Rebbe..."

I was nine years old, but I was not shy. I said, "Yeah, I have a question for the Rebbe."

The question I asked had to do with the song we sing at the start of the Shabbat evening meal, *Shalom Aleichem*. This song has four stanzas and in each stanza we refer to *malachei shalom*, "angels of peace," except for the first stanza, in which we refer to *malachei hashareis*, "ministering angels."

So I asked the Rebbe, "How come? Why are we not consistent and call them 'angels of peace' each time?"

The Rebbe looked at me intently. And I must say that by this time the Rebbe had been up the whole night seeing many people — some of them very important people — but when he spoke to me, I felt like I was the only person who existed in the world. And that he had all the time in the world for me, as if nothing and nobody else mattered.

The Rebbe said, "If you notice, the first two stanzas seem to be redundant. The first one says, 'Peace unto you, ministering angels,' and the second one says, 'May your coming be in peace, angels of peace.' It seems that both are greetings of welcome, so why do we need to welcome them twice?"

He went on, "I'll tell you the reason. There are two types of angels — weekday angels and Shabbos angels. The 'ministering angels' are the weekday angels of servitude, and we are not welcoming them, but saying good-bye to them. In Hebrew, hello and good-bye are the same word,

Shalom, so in the first stanza we are really sending off these weekday angels because Shabbos has begun. After that, we are greeting the Shabbos angels, the 'angels of peace.' So none of this is redundant or superfluous."

With that, the Rebbe smiled at me and asked, "Do you understand?" And I nodded.

That happened in 1962 when I was nine years old — so this is going back 52 years. But I feel as if it was yesterday. I feel that the Rebbe is standing in front of my eyes now and speaking to me. That's the kind of strong impression he left on my mind.

Rabbi Yonasan Wiener teaches at Yeshiva Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem, where he is in charge of the rabbinic ordination program. He was interviewed in his home in August of 2014.

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

This week in...

- > **5735-1975**, upon exiting his office, the Rebbe spoke with a group that came to ask for a blessing for someone suffering from cancer. When hearing that the surgery would be on Tuesday, the Rebbe assured them that if they each undertake to keep Kosher, all will go well. ¹
18 Adar
- > **5737-1977**, the Rebbe instructed that the Mishloach Manos that had been sent to him personally over Purim be distributed between the *yeshiva* students in 770, and those studying in the *kollel*. ²
17 Adar
- > **5738-1978**, the Rebbe instructed the producers of Nichoach, — Songs of the Lubavitcher Chassidim, to include a vintage recording of the *chasid* Rabbi Michael Dworkin singing two Niggunim. ³
20 Adar

1. *Diary of YM Sosover* 2. *Chadashos Mibeis Chayenu* 14 3. *Diary of MA Seligson*

לז"נ

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