

HERE'S *my* STORY

MY RETURN TO JUDAISM

MR. SHMUEL ABRAMSON

I was brought up in a Reform/Conservative environment as a child, in a family that knew about Passover, that knew about Yom Kippur, and that knew nothing else. And since I grew up in the 1960s, during the Psychedelic Era, I became a product of that counterculture. As so many of my generation, I was attracted to Eastern philosophy — the more esoteric, the better.

At one point I joined the Vedanta Society, which was an offshoot of Hinduism. According to its philosophy, anyone could be the wise man of the generation. And when I decided to put a picture of the wise man on my wall, who did I choose? The leader of Christianity, if you can believe that.

But then something happened that turned my life upside down. While in college, I went hiking with a group of friends in New Hampshire, in the Jefferson Mountain range, and I got lost — I and a friend. We ended up spending four days in a blizzard before we were rescued. I had gotten frostbite, and I was bedridden for a while.

When my parents came to collect me to take me home, when my father saw that picture of the leader of Christianity on my wall, he gasped. He realized how assimilated I had become and he said, "Maybe we should take a trip to a synagogue." But I knew that was not the answer for me.

Then, during my recuperation, I read *Nine and a Half Mystics: The Kabbala Today*, a book in which the author, Reform Rabbi Herbert Weiner, describes the Chasidic Movement. And I tell you, I was blown away. I had never before associated Judaism with spirituality, and here I was reading about a richness and a depth that I didn't know existed. This led me to attend a talk by Rabbi Avrohom Shemtov from the Philadelphia Lubavitch Center, and again I was blown away.

Afterwards, I spoke with Rabbi Shemtov and he convinced me to attend a weekend for college students



which had a strong impact on me. But the life-changing experience came when I met the Rebbe at a *farbrengen* at the Chabad Headquarters in Crown Heights.

I remember seeing thousands of *chasidim* and saying, "This is amazing! What a party! Do you guys do this every weekend?" Then I was pushed forward to the front until I was face to face with the Rebbe. He gave me a *l'chaim* and he looked at me and, suddenly, I was frozen in time by the intensity of that look.

How do I explain it?

I heard it said that a person who returns to Torah is like someone who had been walking around, lost in darkness, and suddenly a door opens before him and there inside is a treasure. It was the Rebbe who opened that door for me with one look, which changed my whole life.

That look created a domino effect which reverberates down to today through my children and my grandchildren, through my entire *chasidische* family. That look put me on the path of Torah. At that time, I was so far away from where I eventually wound up — living in Crown Heights, married with children and grandchildren, everybody committed to Judaism.

continued on reverse

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 900 videotaped interviews conducted to date. Please share your comments and suggestions. mystory@jemedi.org

continued from reverse

It wasn't exactly a straight path, but I got there eventually. I went to Yeshiva University and there I met my wife. When we became engaged in 1976, we scheduled an appointment to get a blessing from the Rebbe.

When we arrived at Chabad Headquarters, a lot of people were waiting and I was told, "Put your name down on a piece of paper along with your mother's name. That's what we're going to give to the Rebbe. The Rebbe will bless you and that will be it."

I did what they said, but I didn't want to miss the opportunity to talk to him. So on another sheet I wrote my questions. I thought that maybe when I went into the room, I could slip that second piece of paper to the Rebbe.

But it didn't happen that way. When we went inside, the Rebbe himself said to me, "You want to ask me some questions?"

I said that I had two questions: One — is marijuana a legitimate means to religious consciousness? And two — my lifestyle in the past was beyond my wife's wildest nightmares, so how do we achieve compatibility?

The Rebbe asked, "Are these your only questions?" And I replied, "Yes."

At that, he smiled — and his smile lit up the room — and he said, "Well then you're going to be a very happy couple." And I breathed a huge sigh of relief.

Then he answered my questions. He said that marijuana is a substance that gives you a false sense of something. But after the initial experience, when you try to grab a hold of it and define it, the sensation slips into the realm of fantasy. This is because it's not coming from the inside; it's coming from the outside. Therefore, he said, it's not a legitimate means to a religious experience.

As for my compatibility question, he said that my wife and I need to have a common goal. We should try to strengthen each other in Torah and *mitzvos*. And to do that, we should learn together. He suggested learning the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* in English. When we take on this common goal of fortifying each other and then we have children, we'll be able to pass our goal on to them.

This was the Rebbe's answer to me. And he blessed us to succeed in this, and his blessing became one hundred percent actualized.

Later, I had other personal encounters with the Rebbe which were also very special.

Once I stood in line to ask for a blessing for a *refuah shleima* — a speedy recovery for someone — and people were pushing and I couldn't get the words out. Suddenly, the Rebbe turned and looked at me, and it was as if everything stopped. I had a feeling of calmness and I asked for the blessing.

I had the same experience when the Rebbe was sitting *shiva* in his house after the Rebbetzin passed away. There were police lines all around — so many people came, many famous people as well. I waited for a long time and, finally, I was in front of the Rebbe. I started to recite the standard words of consolation in Hebrew and then I stopped — I couldn't go on.

That's when the Rebbe looked at me and it was as if the room was empty — there was no one else there. Everything had disappeared. And I felt locked in with him.

I remembered thinking that here I came to console the Rebbe and it was the Rebbe who consoled me.

Mr. Shmuel Abramson and his family live in Monsey, NY. He was interviewed in the My Encounter Studio in Brooklyn in November, 2013

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

This week in...

> **5715 — 1955**, in response to the directors of *Agudas Chabad* of Israel who wrote of the need for another site for the growing Chabad community, the Rebbe instructed that the village "Kfar Chabad 2" in Israel be built in proximity to the original village of Kfar Chabad. Kfar Chabad was originally instituted in 1949 by the Rebbe Rayatz, and serves as the center of Chabad's activities in Israel.¹
12 Iyar

> **5727 — 1967**, in a series of letters and telegrams to the Jewish community in Israel in the alarming weeks leading up to the Six Day War, the Rebbe opposed the notion of Jews fleeing Israel, stating that Israel is the safest land, and there is absolutely no reason to fear.²
14 Iyar

1. *Igros Kodesh* Vol. 11, p. 88 2. *Igros Kodesh* Vol. 24, p. 333

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