

HERE'S my STORY

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AMERICA NEEDS JEWISH EDUCATORS

RABBI SHALOM REPHUN



from the Book of Proverbs, "Yafutzu maynosecha chutzah — Let your wellsprings flow outwards." Also, Chabad's Kehot Publication Society started putting out books and pamphlets aimed at the Released Time kids. I remember *The Story of Chanukah* and *The Story of Purim* and *The Story of Passover* which were very captivating for young children and sold for only 20 or 25 cents a copy.

My yeshiva, RIETS, was not in favor of the program. My teachers didn't try to stop me but I was given the message that my time would be better spent learning Torah and turning to education only after I completed my studies.

I saw it differently. My motivation was simple — these kids needed Jewish outreach very badly. Once, when I was conducting a Released Time class, I gave the students a quiz for a special prize. And I asked them, "What is the name of the son whose father was asked by Hashem to offer him up as a sacrifice?" And one of the children responded with the name of the founder of Christianity.

I wrote an article about this for *The Commentator* where I said, "If children can confuse the Binding of Isaac with the founding of Christianity, there is a very great need to educate these children. A fire is burning outside, and we have a responsibility to put it out."

After I was ordained a rabbi, I became the principal of Manhattan Hebrew Day School. It was a co-educational institution but, as principal, I began to introduce separation. At the time, I wrote an article for *Jewish Parent* magazine about the recent studies on this subject, which showed that boys and girls learn differently and that boys are often at a disadvantage in a mixed class because the girls are more sedate and teachers tend to favor them. Many studies, including those by the famed child psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim, advocated separation even as early as kindergarten.

This was one issue I was coping with as principal, but

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Back in the 1940s, when I was a student at Yeshiva Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan, the rabbinical seminary of Yeshiva University also known as RIETS, I became involved in a Chabad educational program, although I myself was not a follower of Chabad. It came about by chance. I had gone to do some weightlifting at the gym and another fellow there who happened to be a Chabadnik suggested that I get involved in their Released Time program.

The Released Time program — which allowed public schools to release students for religious studies off the premises — was very popular in the 1940s with something like 2 million kids involved. It is still operational. All religions took advantage of Released Time, but Jewishly, it was Chabad's bailiwick.

At the time that I was part of it, Released Time was chiefly funded by the Committee for Furtherance of Jewish Education administered by Rabbi J.J. Hecht. Later, after 1951, when the Rebbe became the Rebbe, he expanded the idea considerably under the slogan taken

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@jemediia.org

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there were many others. And so there came a time, in 1970, that I decided to go see the Rebbe and ask for his advice on matters that were troubling me.

My appointment was for 10 p.m. although I didn't get into the Rebbe's office until close to 11. My instant impression, meeting him for the first time, was a very, very strong one — for the Rebbe had a most powerful presence.

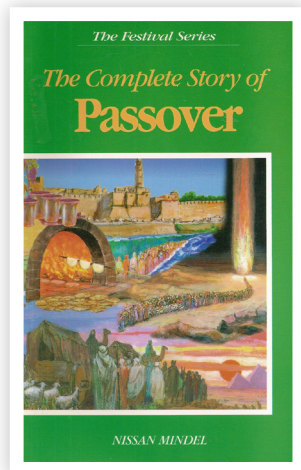
We started to talk. It emerged that he had seen my article in *Jewish Parent* and I was elated to hear it. He obviously agreed that separation was the best thing. Indeed, he was very strongly in favor of separation, and he lauded the idea of separating boys and girls as well as the method I had adopted to do it gradually.

I also told him that I had an invitation from Israel to become the head of a school over there, and I didn't know what to do about this offer. He said, "*Eretz Yisrael* has Jewish educators; it does not need you. America needs Jewish educators, and therefore, you should stay in America and continue your work here."

After that we spoke about the issue of science and religion which was bothering me. I told him that I had heard that the great 12th century Jewish philosopher Maimonides, also known as the Rambam, describes the world as being created in six "stages," not necessarily in six "days." The Rebbe's response was "*Nayn, nisht dos zagt der Rambam* — No, the Rambam doesn't say that..."

And then he said, "It's very clear that the world was created in six days and when the Torah says, *M'mizrach shemesh ad mevo'oh* that means that the sun moves around the earth."

I argued that there is so much scientific evidence to prove that this is not the case. In response, the Rebbe took an envelope from the table, bent it in such a way that one part stayed put while the other one moved around. I didn't understand what he was trying to demonstrate but I was so taken by his attempt to explain this complex matter to me that I didn't ask him more.



Although I was not convinced when I left, since then I have come to understand that there is a very strong position among astronomers today that is consistent with the Rebbe's opinion. Back then it was a total no-no to think like this, but more recently — with Einstein's Theory of Relativity taken into consideration — it is possible for scientists to think otherwise.

I remember the Rebbe saying that, while the Torah is not a science book, whatever it says is true, and there will come a time when the scientists will recognize this fact. But until they recognize it, we just have to live with faith.

As the meeting was going on, every fifteen minutes a bell would ring, which the Rebbe would ignore. The fourth time it rang, I said, "Apparently people are waiting outside; maybe I should not take up so much of the Rebbe's time." His response was "Don't worry," and we continued. When after almost two hours, the meeting came to an end, he gave me a blessing, and I left.

Outside, the Rebbe's secretary asked me — since it was 1 a.m. — "Are you sleepy?" And I said to him, "When there is so much light, one cannot sleep."

When I got home I was still energized. It had been a most impressive and most inspiring meeting. The Rebbe's whole manner was warm and friendly and totally involved in the discussion that we had. I left elated; I left floating on a cloud.

Rabbi Shalom Rephun was the principal of Manhattan Day School and currently resides in Manhattan. He was interviewed in his home in June of 2009.

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

This week in....

> **5723-1963**, the Rebbe instructed the grandson of his childhood teacher, Rabbi Zalman Vilenkin, to hire a dedicated nurse to care for Reb Zalman, saying that he will cover the expenses.¹
17 Iyar

1. Appendix of *Sichos Kodesh* 5723

In loving memory of my dear father

Dr. Leonard Ebin

אריה בן מנחם מענדל ע"ה

Yahrzeit, 14 Iyar

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