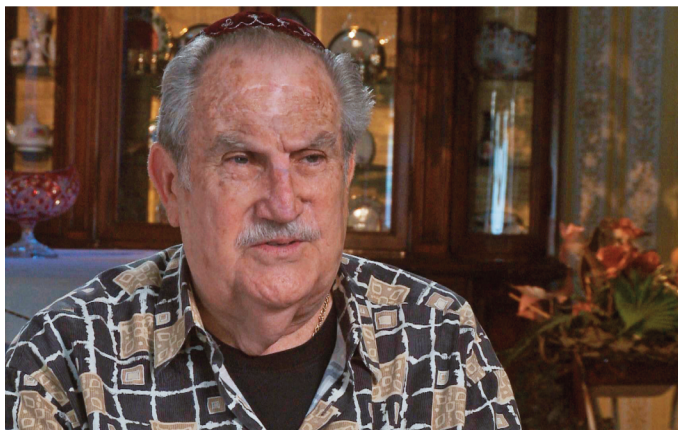


HERE'S *my* STORY

TURN UP THE LIGHTS

MR. LEN WEKSLER



My Dad, of blessed memory, was Reb Chaim Mordechai Yitzchak HaKohen. He was named Chaim Mordechai because he was born a week before Purim. He also died a week before Purim. He came to America from Postov, Russia, which was a Chabad-Lubavitch town, and it was there that he was strongly influenced by Chabad ways.

As far back as I remember, I heard about Chabad. My father loved religion, and he belonged to half-a-dozen synagogues in Los Angeles where we lived, but he was not really at home in any of them; he would always tell me that the only sect of Judaism that he identified with was Chabad but, back then, there were no Chabad synagogues in the city.

I remember my father speaking with great reverence about the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, and how much he would love to see the Rebbe, but it was impossible as the Rebbe was in Europe. Then the Rebbe came to America — this was in 1940, when I was ten. My father was just overjoyed; he was truly ecstatic. And he called the Rebbe's office in New York right away.

Shortly thereafter, the first emissary of Chabad came to

L.A. His name was Rabbi Moshe Hecht. He impressed me tremendously because, while he had a beard and a black hat and coat, he was a modern guy. I remember him playing baseball with me and suddenly stopping to pray *Mincha*. Others came also, mostly to collect funds for Chabad schools — the Tomchei Temimim Yeshiva and the Vocational Schools of the Holy Land, which was a Chabad program where boys were trained not just to learn Hebrew and become rabbis but also to learn a trade so that, if they didn't find work as rabbis, they could at least make a living.

My father contributed, of course, and he also raised money for Chabad. My mother — who was very active in charitable causes, in Zionist causes, and in political causes — knew how to organize fund-raising events. She knew how to set up the tables, who to invite, how much to charge, how to arrange the publicity ... and, because of her know-how, we were able to raise considerable amounts of money.

In 1950, the Previous Rebbe passed away. My Dad was very sad, and he worried what would happen to the Chabad Movement without a leader. Would it disintegrate? And then we heard that the son-in-law, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson would be the Rebbe, though he didn't take over the leadership role until a year after the Previous Rebbe's passing.

We knew very little about him, just that he was young, dynamic and "modern," a word that impressed me the most. He was going to be the guy for this generation — that was my first feeling.

At that time, in 1952, I was a student at L.A. City College, and I was kind of removed from *Yiddishkeit*. Then came the Korean War and my Dad was really afraid that I would be sent over there since I was classified 1A. And one day, he said to me, "Len, you're going back to visit your mom's relatives in New York, in Brooklyn, and you're going to make another visit while you're there ... I've arranged for you to get a blessing from the Lubavitcher Rebbe."

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@jemediia.org

continued from reverse

I was very nervous going to Brooklyn. It was 10 o'clock at night when I arrived at Chabad Headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway, and I saw many people — more than one hundred people — waiting to see the Rebbe. But I got to go ahead of them because I had an appointment.



I was told that they had come just to catch a glimpse of the Rebbe or to shake his hand or to say hello — that's all they were waiting for.

I was ushered into a dimly-lit room and there he was. Meeting him was a very special experience for me. From the time I was born, I had heard my Dad rave about the importance of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and

here he was sitting right in front of me. The thought just sent shivers through me.

He had a black hat on and his beard was very black, coal black. And there was a persona, an aura, about him. But his most arresting feature was his gaze. His eyes were so penetrating — I felt like I was being x-rayed — but this did not make me afraid because there was also a warm glow to them and that put me at ease.

He asked about my father and about my current occupation. I said, "I go to college."

"What are you studying? What do you want to become?"

"I'm going for a Master's degree in education."

"Very good." And then he said, "I went to college also."

"Where?"

"The Sorbonne."

Wow! The Sorbonne University in Paris is a world-renowned university. He went up two notches in my mind. And so I asked him what he studied there, figuring he would tell me something like theology.

"My field was electrical engineering," he replied. "But I prefer to turn on the lights in people's souls."

I remember those words precisely, and I will remember them to my dying day.

And then he explained that every Jew has a divine soul which is like an electrical spark or a pilot light. And that spark never dies, that pilot light never goes out, even if a

Jew has gone away from Judaism. So the way to bring such a person back is to turn up the flame, to ignite it into a blaze of illumination.

He went on to say that this was his goal — to illuminate Jewish life through the Jewish soul, brightening and fanning its flame.

That kind of floored me! Being a young guy I was very impressionable. I saw that this man was really something special. And now I realized that my Dad knew how much he would impress me.

And then the Rebbe asked one thing of me — that when I went home, I would get involved in bringing other young Jews into the fold of Judaism. It didn't matter how — it could be through social activities or religious activities. But he was interested in young people becoming more active in Jewish affairs, as a bulwark against assimilation. He was right that young Jews were assimilating rapidly in the college atmosphere of the day, and it was only because I came from a religious home that I didn't assimilate myself.

Our conversation was over at that point. I don't remember whether he ushered me to the door or what happened next — I was totally walking on air. I felt very special; I really did. That meeting with the Rebbe was quite a highlight in my life.

Len Weksler is a teacher based in Carlsbad, California, where he is a member of Chabad at La Costa. He was interviewed in his home in August of 2010.

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

This week in....

> **5727 — 1967**, four months after the Rebbe Rayatz's passing, the Rebbe called a meeting to discuss the future of Chabad's educational arm "Merkos L'inyonei Chinuch". The Rebbe, elder *chasidim*, and respected students of the *yeshiva* were present. The Rebbe stated that he would report the results of the meeting to the Rebbe Rayatz, the next time he visits his resting place.¹
26 Sivan

¹ Yemei Breishis p. 175

In honor of
the Rebbe's Shluchim to Pittsburgh
By The Jacobs Family

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