

HERE'S my STORY

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MRS. LEAH BRONNER

I'm Leila Leah Bronner. I'm a professor of biblical studies, and I'm honored to be interviewed about the Rebbe, although neither I nor my family are Chabad Lubavitch.

I myself was born in Czechoslovakia to a Hungarian rabbinic family, which immigrated to the United States at the time of the Second World War. I grew up in Williamsburg, New York, and then, when I married, I went with my husband to live in South Africa. I worked in the academic world, while my husband, though an ordained rabbi, worked in the diamond business. We had three beautiful children, and we became very involved in the Jewish community in Johannesburg — among other things helping found the Yeshiva College for elementary and high-school age boys and girls; in fact, my husband became the first president of Yeshiva College.

In 1969, when our oldest daughter Temmi was finishing high school, we had a problem deciding where she should pursue a higher education. We didn't want her to go to the university in Johannesburg where I was teaching, because we didn't think that she would get enough of a Jewish atmosphere there. We contemplated sending her to America, to New York, where we had roots and where our extended family lived, or to Israel, to Bar Ilan University. We were very Zionist and we believed in *Torah im derech erez*, learning Torah and being part of a modern world as well.

As we were trying to decide, my father, the late Rabbi Isaac Amsel, suggested we ask the Lubavitcher Rebbe for his opinion. Back then, the Rebbe wasn't as famous as he became later, but people were already flocking to him to ask him



Johannesburg, South Africa, circa 1960s

questions and to get his guidance. At first we were not sure that he would see us — after all, we were not Chabad *chasidim* — but it turned out that the Rebbe was very accessible, and it was possible for anyone to make an appointment with him.

We were awed when we entered, because we were going to see the Lubavitcher Rebbe, but even more so because of how he behaved. When we came in, he actually stood up! I couldn't believe it. I was most impressed by his majestic appearance, his penetrating eyes and his friendly manner.

We told him about our situation — that we live in South Africa, that we've been there since the 1950s, that our children were born there. Now our daughter has to go to study overseas because we don't want her to stay in Johannesburg. We explained why and we expressed our concerns about the political situation, which had many people leaving the country in anticipation of future unrest.

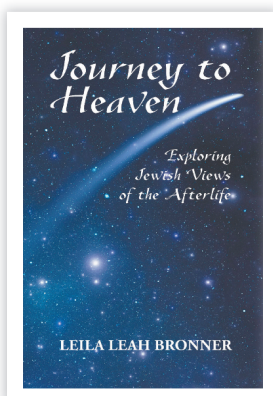
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MY ENCOUNTER
with the **REBBE**

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

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We asked which was the better choice for her: New York or Israel? We were concerned that in Israel we had no family and our daughter's Hebrew was not proficient enough for university studies. And we were wondering if Stern College, the women's college of Yeshiva University, would be more appropriate.



The Rebbe surprised us by responding, "Why don't you think about setting up a Stern College branch in Johannesburg?"

I said, "That's a great idea, but I don't think we could do it."

He said, "Why not? I understand that you established the first Yeshiva College in South Africa."

I said, "A school, a *yeshiva*, is much easier to establish. But I don't think that there are enough women candidates for a Jewish university in Johannesburg." I mean, the population of the whole of South African Jewry was 120,000 at that time.

At the end of the meeting we said we would think about his idea and we would see what route to take. In the end, we sent our daughter to Stern College in New York, where she married a doctor from Yeshiva University, and they have children and grandchildren living in New York now.

Even though we didn't accept his advice, we thanked the Rebbe very warmly for receiving us and for taking the time to advise us.

We didn't feel that we had the capacity to establish such an institution. It would have been too much for us. But I understood the Rebbe's thinking. The Rebbe believed in building up Jewish communities wherever they may be. He believed in *Ufaratzta Ufaratzta*, "breaking out, spreading out" Jewish ideas throughout the world. So he didn't want that we or our children should leave our Jewish community, but stay and build it up.

That was his goal — to strengthen Jewish communities everywhere — and that is what Chabad is doing today all over the world.

Dr. Leila Leah Bronner is a noted author, professor, writer and community activist. Her books and articles focus on the Hebrew Bible and themes in Jewish history and culture, with an emphasis on women's issues. She was interviewed at her home in Los Angeles in November of 2012.

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

This week in...

- > **5688 — 1928**, the Rebbe departed Berlin and arrived in Riga the following day. He would remain in Latvia through Tishrei, the month of festivals, to be at the side of his father-in-law, the Rebbe Rayatz.¹ *12 Menachem Av*
- > **5730 — 1970**, at a *Farbrengen*, the Rebbe instructed Rabbi Tuvia Peles that on his return to Israel, he should visit all the battlefronts of the War of Attrition (the Suez, Golan, etc.) and relay his heartfelt blessings to the soldiers stationed there, and to share with them some wine from the *Farbengen*. The Rebbe also asked him to ask the soldiers to don *tefilin* and give a few coins to charity daily, promising a new pair of *tefilin* to any soldier who needed one.² *6 Menachem Av*
- > **5731 — 1971**, in honor of the ninth of Av fast day, which fell on a Shabbos that year, the Rebbe held a special *Farbrengen* and recited a *Chasidic* Discourse on the first verse of Eicha, a very unusual verse for a *Chasidic* discourse. The Rebbe subsequently edited and added notes and references for its publication. *9 Menachem Av*

1. *The Rebbe's Soviet Passport* 2. *Sichos Kodesh 5730 Vol. 2, p. 553*

In honor of the Rebbe
and lezchus our children
and our parents

By Anonymous

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