

HERE'S my STORY

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"HE WILL ALWAYS CHOOSE G-D"

RABBI FABIAN SCHONFELD



My name is Mordechai Shraga Schonfeld — in English I am known as Fabian Schonfeld. For over fifty years, until he passed away, I was a *talmid* of the Rav, that is Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik. There were only a few of his students who could call themselves his *talmidim*, who had a relationship with him that in many ways resembled that of a *chasid* to a Rebbe, and I had the privilege to be one of them.

In many ways, the Rav fostered my later attachment to Chabad Lubavitch because, in every major lecture that he gave, he always quoted the writings of the Baal HaTanya, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the 18th century founder of Chabad. He urged his students to study the Baal HaTanya, especially before the High Holidays, and he voiced his great admiration for Lubavitch philosophy and wisdom, as well as his great respect for Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

The Rav and the Rebbe first met when they were both young and studying at the University of Berlin — before

the rise of the Nazis. I do not know much about their interaction in Berlin, but I do recall the Rav telling me that, at this time, he was a follower of the Torah giant, Rabbi Chaim Heller, and that the Rebbe was part of that circle.

The Rav also told me that the Rebbe never once failed to begin his day by immersing in the *mikveh*, the ritual bath. The Rav was very impressed by this — that the Rebbe was able to stay committed to *chasidic* ways even in the midst of that secular environment.

The Rav completed his university studies in 1932 and came to America, while the Rebbe went to Paris. When the Nazis invaded, the Rebbe moved onto Nice, and I have a wonderful story to share from his time there, told to me by my step-mother, about what happened to her father, Wolf Reichman, a Belzer Chasid (who incidentally is the grandfather of Rabbi Heshy Reichman, another *talmid* of the Rav).

Wolf Reichman fled to Nice with his family and, as Passover was approaching, he was worried where he was going to get the *matzah*. After much trouble, he found a farmer somewhere who was willing to sell him wheat, which he planned to grind himself. He would have to make the oven kosher and oversee the baking, and all this was causing him a great deal of worry.

As he was sitting there worrying, he heard a knock at the door and was surprised to find standing on his doorstep a bearded young man sporting a French beret. The young man said, "I hear that you are thinking of baking *matzah* for Passover. If you succeed, please let me know because I also need *matzah*." Wolf Reichman agreed and promised to contact him.

Before he could, however, the young man returned with a parcel in his hands. He said, "I came to you a few weeks ago about the *matzah*. In the meantime, I was able to find wheat, grind it and bake it. And since you

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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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were willing to share your *matzah* with me, I want to offer you some of mine."

This young man's name was Menachem Mendel Schneerson — this was the future Rebbe. What impresses me about this story is that he didn't forget about Wolf Reichman, and, even though he no longer needed the *matzah*, he took the trouble to return and share what he had baked.

Of course, the Rebbe never forgot anything. His memory was legendary. I want to tell a story about it that I heard from the Rav.

Although, once they were both in America, the Rav and the Rebbe had very little face-to-face contact, the Rav went to a Chabad *Farbrengen* held in celebration of thirty years of the Rebbe's leadership. When I saw him next, he said to me, "You know that I am considered to be a good public speaker, but if I have to speak for even five minutes in public, I have to prepare for an hour or two. I never say anything by heart, I always have notes to be sure I am saying what I want to say.



Rabbi Soloveitchik with his students

"The Rebbe was sitting and speaking for hours and hours without a shred

of paper in front of him! He quoted Midrash, he quoted the Zohar, he quoted Talmud. And he quoted everything correctly, exactly as printed, without hesitation, without looking at any kind of notes. This I would never be able to do."

The Rav was deeply impressed by the Rebbe's marvelous memory and his ability to transmit deep teachings to thousands of people without consulting even a single piece of paper.

Speaking of deep teachings, I would like to tell another story about a time when I visited the Rebbe along with a delegation of rabbis from the Rabbinical Council of America. This was in the 1970s, and legislation had been proposed in the US Senate to outlaw kosher slaughter. We sought the advice of the Rebbe what to do about this crisis. In response, he gave us names of sympathetic senators we could cultivate, and he strongly suggested we avoid making provocative statements but work to convince people of the righteousness of our cause.

In honor of our dear Rebbe

By

Anonymous

& An admirer of JEM in Bournemouth, UK.

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And then he turned to us and said, "I want to ask you rabbis a question. If you will recall, when the Prophet Elijah challenged the errant ways of the Jews of his day, he gave them a choice. He said to them, 'How long will you be sitting on the fence? If you believe in the idol Baal, go with Baal. If you believe in G-d — Hashem Elokim — go with Hashem. You can't follow both at the same time.' All this is related in the Book of Kings. So my question to you is this: How did Elijah even dare to present them with such options? Wasn't he taking a great chance? Wouldn't his challenge to the Jews legitimize idol worship?"

Then the Rebbe continued, answering his own question, "No, Elijah wasn't taking a chance. Elijah knew that if you push a Jew against the wall, he will always choose G-d. He will always say, 'I follow G-d.' Elijah was not taking any chances in presenting such a choice, because he knew what was inevitable. If you push a Jew against the wall and demand that he stand up for what he believes in, he will always say '*Hashem hu haElokim.*'"

Rabbi Fabian Schonfeld is a member of the Rabbinical Council of America and was the rabbi of Young Israel of Kew Gardens Hills for 60 years before his retirement in 2011. He was interviewed in his home in April of 2004.

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

This week in...

- > **5733 — 1973**, the Rebbe's secretariat sent a public letter to the administrations of all Chabad Yeshivahs and Kollels, urging them to heed the Rebbe's recent call to publish journals of their students' Torah innovations.¹ 15 Elul
- > **5748 — 1988**, at the request of Mr. David Chase, the Rebbe attends the groundbreaking ceremony for the new extension in 770, places the foundation stone and gives an address on its significance. 17 Elul

1. *Igros Kodesh* Vol. 28, p. 315

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