

HERE'S my STORY

Generously
sponsored
by the  Crain-Maling
Foundation

A JEW IS A CATALYST

RABBI EPHRAIM POTASH

When my father, Shimon Potash, was a young boy, he contracted rheumatic fever which damaged one of his heart valves. And as he got older, this condition grew worse. At the time, in the 1950s, there was no cure; today, it's a relatively simple procedure to replace a heart valve, but this technology had not been invented until the 1960s, by which time my father's condition had deteriorated to such an extent that the doctors would not operate.

In any case, my father was in bad shape, and since he was a member of the Chabad Lubavitch synagogue in Manchester, where our family lived at the time, he unburdened his worries about his health to the Rebbe's emissary in England. The emissary, Rabbi Bentzion Shemtov, suggested that he write about it to the Rebbe. And this, my father did, writing in Hebrew and following Rabbi Shemtov's advice to "write to the Rebbe as you would to a good friend."

In his letter, my father told the Rebbe that his heart was so weak he couldn't climb stairs anymore. At this time he was teaching chemistry in a secondary school that was about to be rebuilt; in the new building, in which no elevator was planned, the chemistry laboratory would be on the fourth floor, and my father was fretting about what he would do. He knew for certain that he could not climb four flights of stairs, so how could he earn a living? Of course, he could look for a job in another school, but nobody wanted to hire a sick man who was already in his 50s. What did the Rebbe advise under the circumstances?

The Rebbe's response, dated the 20th day of the Hebrew month of Sivan, 5721 (June 4, 1961), really invigorated my father. First, the Rebbe told him not to worry — the new school building would not be built for another two or three years, and many things could change between now and then. But then the Rebbe set out a mission for



my father.

"It is my hope that you learn Torah every day and especially on Shabbat which is holy to G-d," the Rebbe wrote, "and also that you study *chasidic* teachings ... and that, through your learning, you exert an influence on others."

The Rebbe went on to say that sometimes the words of a professional person, a scientist, or chemist as was the case with my father, have more power than those of a rabbi. People expect a rabbi to quote Torah, and so they don't give the rabbi's words as much weight as they would a professional person. "Therefore," the Rebbe wrote, "you should influence people to learn *chasidic* philosophy which was revealed in our generation."

Anticipating the question — how can one Jew make any real difference — the Rebbe wrote: "The Jewish people are a small nation. We are a very small percentage of the world's population, so what hope can we have to influence the world ... to affect change?"

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 over 1300 videotaped interviews conducted to date. These stories are based on the recollection of the individuals recounting them. Please share any corrections, comments and suggestions. mystory@jemedia.org

continued from reverse

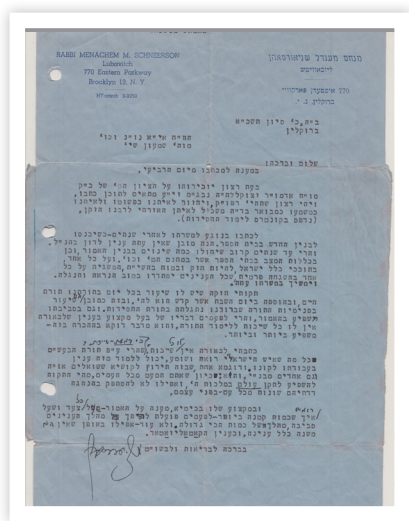
In answering his own question, the Rebbe used a metaphor from chemistry: "We find that very often a very small amount of reactant can cause a large reaction to happen. That's the function of a Jew — to be a catalyst."

Now I would like to explain a little bit about what a catalyst is in chemistry. Obviously, the Rebbe didn't need to explain this to my father, because my father was a chemist, but many people may not know this.

In chemistry, when you want two chemicals to react together that would normally remain inert, you use a very small amount of a third substance — called a catalyst — to stimulate a reaction. The classic catalyst is iron filings; you sprinkle them into a flask which has the other two reactants in it and — boom! — the reaction takes place. Meanwhile, the iron filings just fall to the bottom of the flask; they are not affected and can be re-used again. That's what the Rebbe was talking about when he referred to a chemical catalyst, concluding, "Not only does it affect its surrounding, the catalyst itself doesn't undergo any changes during the process."

In other words, as Jews, we are causing things to happen in the world, but we don't need to be affected by the world when we do that. We are just bits of nothing and yet we have a big effect on the whole world. That's what the Rebbe wrote to my father.

Now my father loved science and he especially loved chemistry, and the fact that the Rebbe related to him on his level really impressed him. I remember that the house



became electrified when he read that letter. And, from that moment on, he was the Rebbe's man — he sought to carry out the mission that the Rebbe sent him on to the fullest. Instead of worrying about his heart, he went forth to influence those he encountered.

Unfortunately, his health did not improve, because there was no chance of it improving. Six years later, at age 58, my father passed away. But those six years were full of meaning because the Rebbe set a course for his life and that made all the difference.

There is a little postscript that I would like to add. My father passed away on the same day as the Rebbe's brother, Yisroel Aryeh Leib Schneerson, on the 13th day of the Hebrew month of Iyar, though not in the same year obviously — the Rebbe's brother in 1952 and my father 15 years later. But it always meant something to me that the Rebbe said Kaddish — the prayer that mourners say — on that day, when I also said Kaddish for my father, both of us sanctifying G-d's name together in memory of our loved ones who were no longer in this world.

I'm sure that a lot of people said *Kaddish* for the Rebbetzin, as they would for a mother. Just as I am sure that, later on, a lot of people said *Kaddish* for the Rebbe. They were a mother and a father for so many — in fact, for everybody.

Mr. Ephraim Potash serves on the board of directors of the Lubavitch Yeshiva in London, where he resides with his family. He was interviewed in February of 2015.

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

This week in....

> **5737 - 1977**, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin made a historic visit to the Rebbe on his way to Washington to meet President Carter for the first time. Begin and his entourage were greeted by the Rebbe on the steps of 770. The Rebbe talked to Begin about the need to remain strong in protecting every inch of the land of Israel. 2 *Menachem Av*

In honor of the birthday of
Masha Baila bas Chaya Mushka

You can help us record more testimonies by dedicating future editions of *Here's My Story*

A project of:



JEWISH EDUCATIONAL MEDIA

mystory@jemedia.org | myencounterblog.com | 718-774-6000
784 Eastern Parkway | Suite 403 | Brooklyn, NY 11213

© Copyright, Jewish Educational Media, 2016