

HERE'S my STORY

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FAITH AND REASON

RABBI MOSHE TENDLER



I grew up in the Lower East Side of New York. At that time, it was a Jewish *shtetl* in every way, full of first generation immigrants, who dressed, talked and behaved as they did in Europe. But observing them and learning from them proved to be extremely valuable to me, as I had contact with authentic Judaism from an early age.

My father was a student of the Chafetz Chaim in Radun, Poland, and he guided my Torah learning. He sent me to the Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Yeshiva (RIETS), where I received my rabbinic ordination, and where I studied with Rabbi Pelayah, Rabbi Belkin and Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik.

While there I merited to meet Shifra, the daughter of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the top Torah authority in America, and we got married. A year later — in 1949 — I was offered a part-time job teaching at RIETS, and that's where I have been ever since. Meanwhile, I also received a doctorate in microbiology from Columbia University, where I was also offered a part-time

teaching job and eventually become the chairman of the department.

Now, because I was the son-in-law of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, I became the address for inquiries from various quarters; I was easier to reach than he was. Rabbi Hodakov, who was the secretary to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, would often call me to pass on messages, and I served as an intermediary, but I had no direct contact with the Rebbe.

One day I got a call — I believe it was sometime in 1970 — that the Rebbe wanted to see me. This audience lasted from midnight until seven in the morning, and much of that time we spent talking biology.

The Rebbe was well-versed in secular knowledge and he was up-to-date on the latest advances in science. I have to admit that he was even ahead of me when it came to physics, especially the subject of radioisotope dating of the age of the earth.

Of course, his opinion was that any data that seems to suggest the earth is older than 5,700 years old is only a test from G-d. Period. He argued that the rate of decay changed at the time that the creation of the earth was completed and, therefore, scientists are making a mistake in assuming that the current rate of decay has remained the same. Of course, if the rate of decay by which we date uranium has altered over time, then this would have a huge impact on the scientific dating system.

During our conversation, the Rebbe proposed that I write a biology textbook which would be acceptable to the New York State Department of Education but which would skirt the whole issue of evolution. At that time, the study of evolution was mandatory, and students could not pass the Regents tests without answering questions about this subject.

But I wasn't prepared to write such a textbook; I didn't think it was necessary because many Torah scholars found ways to reconcile Torah and the dating of the earth. Furthermore, I was not disturbed by the issue of

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MY ENCOUNTER
with the **REBBE**

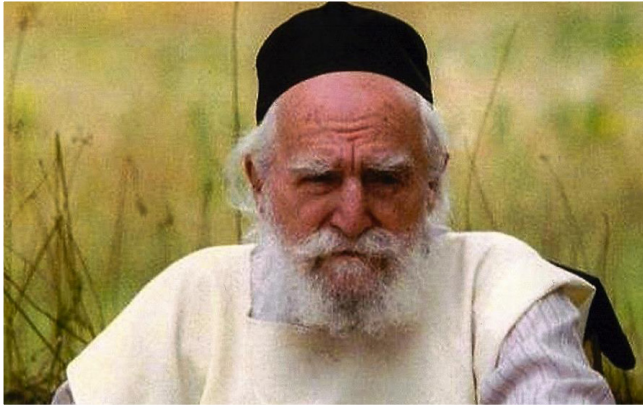
An oral history project dedicated to documenting the life of the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory. The story is one of thousands recorded in over 1400 videotaped interviews conducted to date. These stories are based on the recollection of the individuals recounting them. Please share any corrections, comments and suggestions. mystory@jemedia.org

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evolution as the Rebbe was.

Overall though, I was most impressed by his scientific knowledge. For example, he was very much up-to-date on new drug development such as medicines coming from wasps and marine animals, the denizens of the deep. These were recent developments, newly published in scientific journals, and yet he knew about these things. He cited these discoveries as evidence that whatever G-d has created in this world has a reason and a purpose.

His reading would imply that we, as human beings, are meant to take G-d's creation a step farther. In medical ethics, one of the key questions that is often asked is,



Rabbi Moshe Feinstein

"Are we playing G-d?" Using the Rebbe's interpretation, I would answer that question with, "G-d wants us to play G-d. He created so much out there for us to use, and He wants us to complete the rest of His work."

Even if I disagreed with the Rebbe on the issue of the age of the earth, I could not dismiss his arguments regarding this issue. And indeed, these days, when I lecture on evolution all over the world, I make a point of presenting the opposite point of view, using the Rebbe's words. And I have to say that what he taught me has been of great value to me.

In addition, he taught me another invaluable lesson of a personal nature. At the time, I was under attack by the fundamentalist element in Israeli society because of a recommendation I made for a director of Shaarei Tzedek Hospital in Jerusalem. The doctor I recommended was a pathologist, and many fundamentalists assumed he performed autopsies which they considered as being against Jewish law. However, he was a different kind of

pathologist, an expert in cell components — something which this group was too ignorant to grasp — and he did not perform autopsies. Nonetheless, this fact did not save me from condemnation by some quarters.

I brought this issue up to the Rebbe because I was thinking of immigrating to Israel, but I feared being castigated over there. His response was unusual; he said, "It's not the Jewish way to make a decision out of fear. You can't live your life afraid of somebody."

He went on, "Don't think too much of what others will say; if you're sure you're right, you do what you have to do. You have to be independent." He even suggested that one has to be independent in the way one serves G-d.

His opinions were most surprising and enlightening to me. In short, I would say that this encounter with the Rebbe was unforgettable. It has informed my life in many ways — not the least, professionally. And, of course, he has informed the lives of many. He set up a system that works unbelievably well and is able to reach millions of people and even more when we consider all the generations to come.

Rabbi Moshe Tendler is a Professor of Jewish Medical Ethics and a Professor of biology as well as a Rosh Yeshiva at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University. He was interviewed in Brooklyn in May of 2010.

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ע"י בנייהם ר' נחמן ור' אברהם ומשפחתם שיחיו

This week in....

> **5721 - 1961**, the first chartered plane coordinated by a group of *chasidim* from Israel arrived in New York, enabling *chasidim* from afar to join the Rebbe for the festive month of Tishrei. Throughout their month-long visit, the Rebbe showed great affection to these guests. This grew into a yearly tradition, with guests from abroad visiting the Rebbe for the holidays. 27 Elul

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